

# THE INVESTIGATORS in

## THE MYSTERY OF THE THREE BOGUS INVESTIGATORS





in

**THE MYSTERY  
OF THE  
THREE BOGUS INVESTIGATORS**

When Bob sees a boy in a hardware store, he doesn't expect anything peculiar. Only when he overhears a casual conversation does he learn that the boy's name is also 'Bob' and he is a member of 'The Three Investigators'! Bob suspects that there is another group of boys impersonating him and his friends, Jupiter and Pete. To put a stop to this game, they set off to track down the bogus investigators. The plot thickens when The Three Investigators find themselves tackling the same case that the imposters are working on!

The Three Investigators  
in  
The Mystery of the Three Bogus Investigators

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## 1. A Surprising Encounter

Bob Andrews quickened his pace, but the distance was no longer enough to push past the boy with the blond fuzzy head unobtrusively. As feared, the boy stepped up to the shelf where only one metal detector was still waiting for a buyer. With his back to Bob, he took it in his hand and examined it.

Hopefully he'll put the detector aside, Bob thought, trying to decipher the price tag stuck to the bar above the shelf. The device with which The Three Investigators wanted to search for treasure on the beach was not cheap. Their own detector was not longer functioning, but fortunately they had saved enough money to purchase a brand-new one.

Jupiter and Pete would be furious if he came back without it. Together with his friends, Bob had driven up the coast to Santa Barbara, to look after the house of an acquaintance of Jupiter's Uncle Titus for a few days.

The Three Investigators wanted to use the time wisely for several activities. One was a school assignment where they had to prepare a presentation for biology class. The topic was on the platypus, an animal unique to Australia. However, they couldn't sit at their desks all day. That was unhealthy. Exercise, on the other hand, was healthy, for example, going to the beach, swimming in the sea and looking for treasures hidden in the sand. Bob suspected that this would soon become their main activity.

The other boy had finished looking at the metal detector. Then he jammed the device under his arm and made his way to the checkout.

Disappointed, Bob looked around for a sales assistant. Maybe there was still stock in the warehouse. His gaze fell on a woman in a white coat who was placing items from a shipping crate onto the shelves.

She addressed the other boy who was just passing her. "So you're buying this?"

The boy, probably about Bob's age and a little shorter than him, nodded.

"You're lucky!" the woman said. "It's the last one we have. It's hard to imagine investigators without a metal detector."

Bob winced. The other boy was an investigator?

"You're right about that," the boy replied. "How fortunate was it that Mrs Willard sent me straight here to get this."

"Give her my wishes, Bob!"

Involuntarily Bob had to grin. "What a coincidence, his name is like mine," he thought to himself. Anyway, that was not unusual. Bobs were a dime a dozen in America.

"I will!" The boy turned to go.

The sales assistant called after him: "Good luck with your search!"

Nonchalantly, the boy gave a thumbs up. "We've got that covered, after all we are The Three Investigators!"

"Exactly," said the sales assistant.

At first, Bob thought he had misheard, but the boy said it loud and clear enough: "... After all, we are The Three Investigators!" Bob decided to go after the boy immediately.

"Can I help you?" the sales assistant asked as he tried to walk past her.

"No, yes... later!" Bob stuttered, pushing past her so frantically that he tripped over a shipping crate. A flood of egg timers poured onto the floor.

"I'm... I'm sorry. I'll be right back and clear this... Oh... excuse me!" Bob groaned and rushed on. The other boy was just leaving the hardware store. Bob quickened his pace.

The cashier's critical gaze met him as he whizzed through the empty checkout aisle without paying anything. "Wait a minute! What's your hurry?"

"I didn't get anything," Bob said and continued walking briskly out of the store.

Outside, Bob looked around and saw that the boy was standing near the junction to the car park. At that very moment, a car rolled up from the car park. The boy opened the passenger door, got in and the car sped away. Bob tried to make out the licence plate number, but he only saw the car from the side.

Bummer! Bob took a breath and turned around. The cashier had got up from his stool and was staring at him.

"He... I thought... I know him, that boy, you know," Bob said, smiling. "He's a friend of mine. Just missed him, I'm afraid!"

The cashier made a face and Bob went back into the hardware store. In the meantime, the sales assistant had collected all the egg timers.

"I'm afraid it's too late for you to help now," she said when she saw Bob returning.

"I apologize," Bob murmured. A thousand thoughts flew through his head, from which he made a rough plan of how to get the information he now needed. "That boy just now, I think I know who he is. Bob's his name, isn't it?"

"Yes," the sales assistant confirmed, "Bob Andrews."

Andrews? What? It hit Bob like a blow. Now it was clear that something was wrong. Bob tried to keep his composure. "Isn't he an investigator?"

The sales assistant nodded. "Do you know him? Or did you overhear our conversation?"

"I know him," Bob said. "Together with his two friends, he helped my aunt to find an old... clock. We thought the clock was stolen at first, but then it turned out that... well, anyway, he left his fingerprint powder set at my aunt's place, so I saved it for him."

Bob reached into the jacket pocket where he had put his own kit for the trip to Santa Barbara. The lid even bore the initials 'BA'.

"Here!" he said, showing her the kit and making sure that she saw the initials. "I'd like to give it back to him. Bob... said something about a Mrs Willard, whom you both seem to know?"

"Yes, she is an old school friend of mine. She lives up in the mountains at the moment—right by the canyon. She usually comes to see me herself, but since she had the operation on her knees..."

Bob raised his eyebrows in interest. "I suppose she is looking for a lost object?"

The sales assistant nodded. "Yes, something like that, and The Three Investigators are helping her. She got the tip from me!"

"Okay," Bob said and thought quickly. Could he squeeze the sales assistant any further without attracting attention? He decided against it. What was important first was the address. "Then I could drop the powder off at Mrs Willard's," he said. "Where exactly—"

An elderly lady had approached and stood right next to Bob. "Will you get a move on?" she barked. "Where can I find the garden hose reels? Unlike you two, I have things to do today!"

The sales assistant winked at Bob. "At the end of Barranco Road," she said quickly. "Number thirteen."



“Are you pulling my leg, young lady?” the customer shouted. “I’m looking for a garden hose reel, not an excursion tip!”

“Too bad,” the sales assistant said dryly. “The garden hose reels are on Aisle 15 over there!”

Bob grinned at the sales assistant and took off.

The checkout area was still empty. Probably typical for the early afternoon.

“Metal detectors are sold out, I’m afraid,” Bob called out to the cashier before he could open his mouth.

As soon as Bob had left the hardware store, he raced off to tell Jupiter and Pete what he had just encountered.

So it seemed that there were two groups known as ‘The Three Investigators’. As it was, there was another ‘Bob Andrews’, so logically there would be another ‘Pete Crenshaw’, and... and another ‘Jupiter Jones’!

Goodness! Bob wondered how the First Investigator would like that!

## 2. Bogus Bob

When Bob entered the house they were residing in, his friends were unpacking clothes from their backpacks and stowing them on an open wall shelf.

Uncle Titus's friend, Brad Capote, was a biology teacher and author of books like *The Trees of California* and *Sacred, Expensive and Dangerous Plants of Southeast Asia*. His small but beautifully situated house had two floors which were nestled slightly offset against one of the large hills that surrounded Santa Barbara. From the window of the guest room, The Three Investigators had a view of a small garden and even the centre of the harbour city shimmering in the heat. Behind them lay the glittering sea.

The boys were allowed to use the kitchen, the desk in the study and the extensive library—on the condition that they were careful and put everything neatly back in its proper place. Brad Capote was a very tidy person.

They had divided up the tasks—Jupiter would take care of keeping things tidy; Bob would look after the kitchen and the food; and Pete took over the job of watering the exotic garden plants according to specially prepared instructions.

"Where is the metal detector?" Jupe greeted his friend.

"Sold out," Bob said curtly.

"What?" Angrily, Pete peppered socks into the shelf, which promptly fell out. "We were supposed to go to the beach later to look for treasure! I'm really not in the mood for any 'picklepusses'!"

"Platypuses," Jupiter corrected.

"That's really beside the point now!" grumbled the Second Investigator.

"Pete! How do you expect to pass your project if you've even forgotten the name of the animal we are studying?"

"But that can wait until tomorrow."

"Wait a minute!" Before the two got into an argument, Bob drew attention back to himself. "Jupe! Pete!" he said, giving his voice the tone of a newscaster. "I've just discovered something. There's a detective group at work here in Santa Barbara going by the name of... 'The Three Investigators'!"

"Nice try," Jupiter said and wanted to turn back to Pete.

"The three picklepusses," Pete quipped. "That would fit better!"

"Platypuses!" cried Jupiter.

"I'm serious." Bob took a breath, and then he told his friends what he had encountered.

Jupe and Pete listened intently. Picklepuss or platypus, sea, beach and metal detector were immediately forgotten.

"Someone is copying us," Bob concluded. "I can't tell you how shocked I am!"

"That is unbelievable... and outrageous!" Jupiter exclaimed. "We are The Three Investigators! We are after all..." He was momentarily at a loss for words, and that didn't happen often. "—Unique!" he added and fell silent again.

Pete grinned at Bob. "Then there must be another Pete Crenshaw running around! What did Bogus Bob look like? Better than you?"

"I didn't get a good look at him," Bob confessed, "only from behind, really. He's shorter than me, blond and... dumb."

"Dumb?"

"Yeah, as in stupid!" Bob laughed. "No, of course not. I don't know. I can't very well say: 'What a great guy! I'm thrilled!' For all you know, you might have to go head-on in sports with Bogus Pete!"

"I don't think it's funny," Jupiter said. "We have to get to the bottom of it—that's clear, isn't it? It can hardly be a coincidence. Someone is impersonating us!"

"How do they even know we exist?" asked Pete.

"We have already solved many cases," Jupiter said. "A lot of people know us. Every now and then we've even been featured in the newspapers, although lately we've been trying to avoid getting our photos in public. After all, it's hard to investigate well when half the world knows us!"

"Exactly, we should stay incognito," Pete said.

Jupe looked at his friend in surprise. "Incognito? When did you learn such a term?"

"Well..." Pete grinned. "'Incognito'—concealing one's identity," Pete said in a 'Jupiter lecturing' tone.

"Something like that." Bob glanced at the bed on which lay a sports magazine. The cover story was about a basketball star and it had the subtitle: 'On Holiday, I Prefer to Stay Incognito'.

"Maybe it's all a game." Jupiter pinched his lower lip. "The boys have read about us and are now playing investigators too. Maybe we are... real role models!"

"Don't brag," Bob said. "Besides, I don't believe it. The whole situation didn't feel like that. It felt more serious somehow. When you play a game, you don't tell the sales assistant in the hardware store that you are a member of The Three Investigators. I think someone is carrying out investigations using our name!"

"We'll find out," Jupiter said.

"But we can't just ring Mrs Willard's doorbell and discreetly point out that we are the real Three Investigators," Pete interjected.

Bob tilted his head. "And why not?"

"Because we wouldn't get to the bottom of the secret that way," Jupe said. "There could be a fierce confrontation. At the end of it, we would prove that we are the real Three Investigators and everything would blow up. Then we wouldn't be able to find out the story behind it. For all you know, the three bogus investigators might have some terse explanation ready and take off. They might have very specific reason to impersonate us, so we have to get to the bottom of it."

"I'm all for it," Bob agreed. "Also, it would be better if we could observe the bogus investigators from a distance... undercover... secretly... and incognito."

"That's right!" Jupiter agreed. "I suggest we go to Barranco Road and have a look at the area and the house."

"What about the platypus?" asked Pete hypocritically.

"We can still work on the presentation tomorrow," Jupiter decided without making a face.

The Three Investigators left their backpacks half unpacked and gathered the most important investigation equipment. This included Pete's lock pick set as well as the tracking transmitter

and receiver, three flashlights, binoculars and a camera. They packed everything into a sports bag.

Jupiter looked around and grabbed a telescopic insect net and collection box from the biology teacher's storeroom. If necessary, they needed a reason for roaming around. According to the city map, the residential area they were heading to was surrounded by nature.

Then they left the house. As they were about to get into the Beetle, Jupiter thought of something. "Er, Bob..." he said. "Would Bogus Bob recognize you?"

Bob shook his head. "I don't think so. I was behind him all the time. We didn't exchange glances or speak to each other."

"Okay," Jupiter said, but was still not completely satisfied. "Still, we have to be careful. We don't know if the three bogus investigators know what we look like. Until we have a good plan, we should avoid running into them."

Jupiter got into the car and closed the door. "Let's go!"

Barranco Road was outside Santa Barbara and the investigators had to drive a bit into the mountains. Again and again, the winding road revealed the breathtaking view of Santa Barbara Bay. However, the three had no intention to stop to take souvenir photos—not now anyway.

After a while, not too far away, they saw a residential area on a ridge covered with wild macchia scrub. Further down, the terrain led into a canyon whose river course provided lush vegetation. Even trees grew here.

They crossed the gorge on a narrow bridge and a little later, Bob turned into the settlement. There was a main road that led directly towards the sea, which rolled in the distance towards the beaches of Santa Barbara. Three palm-lined avenues branched off each side of the road, along which houses were situated. They all looked very distinguished.

Barranco Road was the last of the three avenues on the right. Bob braked and skilfully steered the car around a yellow convertible parked far too close to the junction.

Slowly he let his Beetle roll past the properties. On either side were detached houses, set back a little. They were stately estates with well-tended gardens and obviously well-watered colourful flower bushes. Flashy cars were parked in front of large garages. Two small children were playing next to a villa, otherwise the street was deserted.

"It must be the last house," Jupiter said, keeping an eye on the house numbers. "—The last house on the left."

"Right by the canyon," Pete said, "and probably with an ocean view. Not bad."

"Envious?" asked Bob.

Pete shook his head. "Me? No! Much too far from the beach!"

Bob laughed and slowed his driving. "There it is up ahead!"

However, they could not see much. A high wall made of large anthracite-coloured stone blocks blocked their view of the property. It was only interrupted by a steel entrance gate. Jupiter managed to decipher the name engraved in the stone to the right of the gate as he drove past. It said: 'E. Nguyen'.

"Nguyen? Not Willard?" asked Jupiter in surprise. "Are we in the wrong place?"

"The sales assistant gave me this address," Bob said. "13 Barranco Road. She may have made a mistake, of course."

"It's a pity we can't see through the wall," Pete said.

The next moment, they went past the property. The road continued only a few more metres and ended in a turning circle of the cul-de-sac. Straight ahead, the terrain rose. All they could basically see was dry ground and scrub in which plastic waste was caught.

Bob steered the car into the turning circle and stopped. "Maybe we can see the property from the hill," he said, pointing to a small path that disappeared between the bushes after a few metres. "If we do see Bogus Bob, then we'll know that we're in the right place."

"It's worth a try," Jupe said and grabbed the sports bag with the investigation equipment. "Put on your sunglasses, fellas... and your caps!"

"What do we say if someone asks us why we are here?" Pete wanted to know.

Jupiter grinned. "We want to observe rare animals! Anyway, we are bringing all the equipment to do just that. We may not even need to say much."

"And who do you expect is up there?" Bob asked as he was getting out of the car. "Probably no one, especially in this heat!"

Jupiter grabbed the telescopic insect net he had packed and hung the insect box on his belt. "Let's go then," he said and strode ahead himself.

The trail turned out to be a small labyrinth through the undergrowth, but it was easy to keep their bearings. All they had to do was always head uphill.

After a short while, Jupiter began to sweat. Only when they had climbed halfway up the slope did he stop at a sandy bulge in the path.

"We might as well stop for a while here," he said, panting. "The bushes give us visual cover from below, and the height is enough to get a good overview."

In fact, The Three Investigators now have a good view of the property. It was larger than they had expected. It lay across in front of them like a wide rectangle. Only towards the street was it bordered by the wall. On the western and southern sides facing the sea, a sturdy metal fence separated the man-made structure from nature.

Bob pointed to the two-storey house, which was a lot more stately than the one they were living in. "What kind of building style is that?"

"Kind of Asian," Pete said.

Jupiter laughed. "It's news to me that you're an architectural expert, Pete, but I can guess what you're referring to. The roof is curved. It's also called a pagoda roof."

Meanwhile, Bob had grabbed the binoculars. "I don't think the house is that unusual," he said. "However, bamboo is used in some places, and I see several decorations that look Asian. So you have a point, Pete."

"Give me that!" Jupiter took the binoculars from Bob. "The house is on the left near the neighbouring property. From the terrace you look towards the canyon over a gently sloping park landscape, at least half a kilometre long, natural, but always interrupted by beautifully planted patches. There is also a pond, a few trees... and there! Directly where the property merges into the canyon, there is a second building. It is almost at the edge of the terrain and is much smaller than the main house. I guess it's some kind of summer cottage."

"Do you see anyone?" asked Pete, squinting his eyes in concentration.

"No." Just as Jupiter put down the binoculars, he noticed a reflection of light and immediately held them up to his eyes again. "Yes, there is. Something is happening on the terrace. A woman... in a wheelchair. Just then a boy comes along and talks to her. I wonder if it's one of the bogus investigators?"

He handed Bob the binoculars.

"That could be Bogus Bob," Bob said, "but the distance is too great for me to tell for sure. Anyway, he shows the woman in the wheelchair a piece of paper. They read and they

talk, read again, talk. Now she gives him something, which he pockets. He points his hand inside and goes into the house.”

“Can I have a look?” asked Pete, glancing at Bob.

“Now...” Bob ignored him and continued excitedly, “now the boy is coming out again! He has the metal detector in his hand! So we are on the right track, fellas! And there’s someone else—another boy...”

Jupe stepped restlessly from one foot to the other. “Give me the binoculars,” he said impatiently.

“Wait! They’re running on the grass. Now they’re at a boulder. They go around it, search the ground and...”

Jupiter frowned and stared at the property. Suddenly, a movement caught his eye, and it was away from the scene Bob had described. He immediately grabbed the binoculars out of his friend’s hand.

Seconds later, he saw what he had expected. “A man,” he whispered. “He’s kneeling behind a bunch of flowers, also watching everything through binoculars. We are not the only ones interested in the three bogus investigators!”

Jupiter, Pete and Bob were so concentrated on what was happening that they did not notice the soft crackling in the bushes behind them. A moment later, a deep, dark growl sounded.

The Three Investigators turned around. Opposite them, perhaps three metres away, stood a huge dog. It bared its teeth in an aggressive manner.

### 3. Ghost Stories

The dog was a beefy American Staffordshire Terrier. Pete knew the breed. It was not to be trifled with! And there was no sign of the owner anywhere.

Involuntarily, The Three Investigators backed away, but then Pete stopped and whispered: “Stand still! Don’t show any fear! Above all, don’t run away! Don’t look him directly in the eye! Dogs perceive that as aggressive!”

Bob took a breath and forced himself to stay where he was. Hopefully Pete was right.

“Good dog,” he said calmly now. “Good dog!”

The dog remained in its place, but continued to growl.

“Dicky,” a man’s voice was suddenly heard. Branches were pushed aside and the dog’s owner emerged. Apparently he had sneaked up through the undergrowth. Jupiter estimated him to be in his mid-fifties. He wore military-looking clothes and a cowboy hat. From a brown, sun-tanned face, two eyes narrowed to slits focussed on The Three Investigators.

“What are you doing here?” His voice sounded sharp.

Pete and Bob looked at Jupiter, who cleared his throat first. “This is public property, sir, and—”

“Don’t talk to me about public property! There’s never a stranger here unless he’s up to something. We value our peace and quiet! So what are you doing with binoculars? Are you observing the area? Are you spying on us?”

“Can you please restrain the dog?” said Jupe calmly. “Then we will tell you what you want to know, because we have nothing to hide.”

The man drew air through his nose. “Come, Dicky,” he then commanded. The dog joined his owner. “Now, what is it? If you’re planning a burglary, I must advise you against it. Dicky will tear you to pieces!”

“I’m convinced of that,” Jupiter said and smiled. “No. We are here for nature studies.”

“And that’s why you’re watching my neighbour’s house?”

“It kind of got in the way,” Jupiter explained. “Actually, we came here because of the canyon—the canyon that connects to the property in question.”

“The canyon? You expect me to believe that?” Amused, the man raised an eyebrow. “What’s so special about a canyon like this?”

“Er...” Bob began.

“There are... animals here,” Pete added, “rare animals, very rare in fact, they are called uh...”

“The information is secret,” Jupiter interjected.

“What animals? Out with it!” the man shouted. “Dicky!” The dog showed its teeth.

“Platypuses,” Pete said quickly. “Yes! We are looking for platypuses!”

Jupiter and Bob could not suppress a surprised look at Pete.

“Platypuses?” For the first time, the man looked slightly irritated. “What the devil are platypuses? Another one of those eco-stuff that prevents the building of roads and factories?”

“They are, oh, I don’t know—” Pete stammered on.

The man’s expression darkened. “Say, you’re making this up, aren’t you?”

Jupiter gave Pete a quick glance. “No, sir,” he took the floor adopting a know-it-all tone in which he liked to enlighten the rest of the world about facts that should of course be known. “Platypuses are egg-laying mammals. They look like a cross between a beaver and a duck. It is an endemic species, which means that it is only found in a certain region—and in this case, the platypus is from Australia.”

“If the animal is only found in Australia, why are you looking for it here?” the man asked suspiciously.

“That’s just the sensation!” said Jupiter, putting on a feigned bright smile. “There are indications—serious indications—that platypuses live in this canyon! That’s fantastic news, isn’t it? And we’re on their trail! We have everything with us—binoculars, cameras, night-vision device... but the animals are shy. We have to be careful, quiet, attentive, and—”

“Stop!” the man shouted. “How are these critters supposed to have come from Australia to our canyon? Swam across the Pacific? Or flown?”

Jupiter let the smile be followed by a deep expression. “One can only speculate about that,” he said, lowering his voice. “Maybe they were smuggled in. Perhaps a criminal animal smuggler illegally exported and relocated them here. If we can find them, it would be a sensation!”

Slowly the scepticism disappeared from the man’s face. It was impossible to make up such a hair-raising story with so many facts, and certainly not in such a short time. “How did you find out about it?”

“A biology teacher friend from Santa Barbara asked us for help,” Jupiter said, pointing towards the city. “On a field trip around here, he discovered tracks, but he wasn’t sure. That’s why everything is secret, you see. Nobody is interested in a headline that later turns out to be hot air.”

“Sure.” The man pondered. “So now you want to look for this thing? With the insect net?”

“No!” Jupiter laughed. “That’s just our basic equipment, after all, there’s something to discover everywhere. Of course, that doesn’t help us here. As I mentioned before, platypuses are very shy. It would be best if we observed the canyon from this house on the property. That’s why we took a look at the landscape. We wanted to get an overview and find a good observation post.”

“Suppose you find these animals, what would that mean? Reporters? Television? Unnecessary commotion.”

Jupiter appraised the man. “Well, the authorities could still keep it discreet, of course,” he then said, noticing a twitch in the man’s face. “—But it will probably be quite a sensation if the animals are really found there! May I now ask who we are dealing with?” Jupiter asked.

The man hesitated before saying: “Ron Baxter. I live right across the street... from Eric’s house.” He pointed to the property, though it was hard to see from here. “Just not as nice an ocean view as his, unfortunately. By the way, who are you?”

“We are—” Pete began, but Jupiter interrupted the Second Investigator.

“He’s Stan,” Jupiter said and pointed to Pete. Then he pointed to Bob. “Mickey... and my name is Jonathan... Jonathan Miller. We came here from Oxnard.”

Pete and Bob almost choked with surprise, but Baxter was only paying attention to Jupiter.

“And where do you live now?” he asked.

“With a biology teacher in Santa Barbara,” Jupiter replied, “down in the city. His name is Brad Capote, if you know him. He’s also a well-known author, by the way, a specialist in



endemic plant species. He recently published a book about plants in Southeast Asia. If you're interested—"

"All right, all right," said Baxter, "and now you want to go to Eric's property to look for the animals?"

"It would be just ideal," Jupiter said. "Platypuses are nocturnal. We should be able to see everything well from the little cottage over there, otherwise it will be a bit more uncomfortable for us! We'd need tents, a cooking area, probably we'd have to knock out a small clearing... and the sanitary conditions... Could you perhaps ask your neighbour?"

"Eric... is dead," Baxter said, "as of recently. Car accident."

"Oh! I'm sorry to hear that. Did you know him well?"

"Hardly. He did more of his own thing. Sold him firewood for his fireplace sometimes when he wasn't threatening me about Dicky. Now Mrs Willard looks after the house. She is Eric's niece and heiress. You'd best ask her yourself, especially as there are already three boys here."

"Three boys?" said Jupiter, seemingly surprised. "I hope they're not looking for the platypuses too."

The man stared at him.

"Just kidding," Jupiter said, "because I can't imagine that, can you?"

Baxter shook his head. "More like ghosts," he said. "They're probably there because of the ghosts."

Jupiter had to pull himself together not to let on. "Ghosts?" he asked with a sideways glance at Pete. "Are you sure?"

The man nodded. "I think Mrs Willard has gone a bit crazy. Yesterday she told me that her dead uncle Eric was haunting her house. She saw him with her own eyes. I advised her to go to the police, but she didn't want to." He cleared his throat. "I can understand that. They'd probably have called her crazy. So I guess she hired some detective agency."

"Detective agency?" Juve repeated as lightly as possible. "Sounds exciting. Do they have a name?"

"Yeah, wait a minute, she mentioned them." Baxter pushed back his hat and rummaged in his memory. "Didn't get it exactly... quite a stupid name, like the... 'The Three Detectives' or something like that... or 'Investigators'... Anyway, you'd best ask her yourself."

#### 4. The Need for Disguises

By now, the sun was low in the sky. Ron Baxter said a curt goodbye and descended the slope accompanied by his dog.

Jupiter waited until he was out of sight, then he pointed the binoculars at the property again. The man he had been watching was no longer there. The two boys were just walking back across the park towards the house.

The Three Investigators decided to make their way back as well. When they had made it halfway, they saw Baxter at the turning circle and then went into his house, which was directly opposite that of Eric Nguyen. It was secured with an almost prison-like fence with cameras every few metres. Through them, however, as Pete noticed, Baxter could only look at Nguyen's property wall instead of the sea.

The boys reached their car, stowed their equipment and got in. Bob started the engine. As they passed the entrance to Mr Nguyen's property, a man was just sneaking through the gate. He noticed Bob's car and deftly turned away. Jupiter could only make out that he was relatively short and wore sunglasses and on one hand, he clutched a pair of black binoculars.

"Surely that's the guy you saw!" shouted Bob. "Stop?"

"Drive a few metres further," Jupiter said. "Stopping would be too conspicuous. He won't get far without a car..." He thought for a moment. "Either he's a neighbour or... the yellow convertible!"

"What convertible?" asked Bob.

"Just past the junction. You had to swerve quite a bit when you turned in earlier."

"Oh that!" said Bob.

They reached the main road. The convertible was still in the same place. "Turn right," Jupiter said.

"But the way back is on the left..."

"Turn right, Bob."

Bob did as Jupiter had ordered.

"There, onto this property." The First Investigator pointed to the front of a house with closed shutters. "We have to remain unseen."

Jupiter jumped out of the car and looked down the road. Bob left the engine running. It took maybe two minutes, then Jupiter came back. "It was that man. Maybe we can follow him."

"Why?" asked Pete.

"Because he was acting suspiciously. He hid and watched the house and the people with binoculars. When he saw us, he didn't want to be recognized. He parked out of sight of the house so he wouldn't be noticed."

Bob slowly rolled up to the junction. They looked to the left, and just managed to see the convertible going along the main road and then turning onto the freeway.

"Step on it, Bob!" shouted Jupiter.

Bob stepped on the accelerator, and by the time he got onto the freeway, they could not see the convertible anymore.

"He must have been speeding like a maniac," Bob said when they reached Santa Barbara some time later.

“Apparently,” Jupiter said disappointedly. “Let’s go back to our place. We still have a few things to prepare, not least because of your cheeky remark, Pete! You got us into quite a tricky situation by bringing out your platypus!”

“I... I couldn’t think of anything else at the spur of the moment,” Pete tried to defend himself.

“You should have let me do all the talking,” Jupiter admonished him.

“That was so wacky that anyone could actually believe it,” Bob laughed. “—But you saved everything with your story about the smuggled-in animals!”

“So we have to go through with the story now,” Jupiter decided, “and since you got us into this, Pete, tonight you get to pore over books and learn to be an animal expert!”

“Well, thank you,” said Pete.

“‘Records and Research’ is now handled by Pete Crenshaw,” Bob chortled. “By the way, the cover names could have been more imaginative, Jonathan! Or should we call you ‘John’ from now?”

Pete muttered: “Stan... short for ‘Stanley’, isn’t it?”

“Shall we swap names?” asked Bob. “I don’t like Mickey, as if I was named after a famous mouse.”

“You can’t swap,” Jupiter said. “If Ron Baxter happen to meet Mrs Willard again, everything must be congruent. Only our appearance should be changed a little. Luckily we wore sunglasses and caps. That gives us a bit more freedom to disguise ourselves further.”

“And why should we disguise ourselves?” Pete asked when Bob turned into the residential area where their accommodation was located.

“Just in case those three bogus investigators have seen a photo of us,” Jupiter said. “The last article featuring us in *Rocky Beach Today* wasn’t that long ago. Luckily we only appeared relatively small in the accompanying photo. I think with a few clever tricks, we would be well disguised.”

When The Three Investigators pulled up to the driveway of Brad Capote’s house, it was already almost dark. Bob and Pete took care of dinner making spaghetti with a special Bolognese sauce, while Jupiter gathered all kinds of equipment from the biology teacher’s storeroom—a digital single-lens reflex camera with several telephoto lenses, a night-vision device, tripods, and bush knives. Capote had not expressly permitted them to use his equipment, but in Jupiter’s opinion, this was a special case. Satisfied, the First Investigator looked at his collection when Bob called for dinner.

They were hungry enough. Bob’s portions were quite adequate. After the first mouthfuls had been swallowed, Jupiter announced his plan for the disguise. “Stan, you put on a pair of glasses. I have an old pair in my luggage.”

“Glasses?” asked Pete, chewing. “What a dreadful thing.”

“It’s one of several pairs Uncle Titus got from a theatre group,” Juve continued. “The glasses are without prescription, slightly tinted, and should cover almost a third of your face. Anyway, it looks like it came from the last century—but it should not matter for a disguise.”

Meanwhile, Pete had his mouth free again. “This is torture, Jonathan, I—”

“Don’t argue,” Jupiter interrupted him. “And now for you, Mickey—thank goodness you’ve let your hair grow in the last few weeks. I suggest you tie up a ponytail tomorrow!”

“How cool!” Pete teased.

“Not a chance!” shouted Bob.

“Yes!” Jupiter countered. “We mustn’t blow our cover. These little changes might be annoying but work wonders. It’s decided, Bob!”

“What about you?” Bob asked resignedly, helping himself once more to the spaghetti.

“Me?” Jupiter scratched his head. “I actually thought I didn’t have to change anything. If you—”

“No! Not a chance!” Bob interrupted the First Investigator. “How about losing weight by tomorrow?”

“Very funny!”

“I know! I’ll shave your head bald!” Pete shouted.

“No! Not a chance!” Jupe shouted back.

“I’ll go find a pair of scissors,” Bob said.

“Hey! Wait a minute!” Jupe exclaimed. “I did not suggest any permanent damage to your appearance, just a disguise!”

They finally compromised on a crew cut.

“Aunt Mathilda...” said Jupiter in horror. “She’s going to tear my head off!”

“She won’t,” Bob said, “because she won’t recognize you at all!”

Jupiter groaned. Pete left his noodles, stood up and got a pair of scissors and a razor.

“Wait a minute fellas!” Jupiter protested again. “I’ve changed my mind. No, don’t touch my hair!”

“Yes!” Bob countered, quoting what Jupiter had said a while ago: “We mustn’t blow our cover. These little changes might be annoying but work wonders. It’s decided, Jupe!”

“Trust me,” Pete said and held up the razor.

Jupe resigned to his fate. The first hairs fell and he tried to keep calm, but when Pete clumsily scratched the razor’s comb into his skin, he jerked forward in pain. A broad shaved strip from his temple to the back of his head was the result. It now looked more like weeds than a hairstyle.

“Wow,” said Bob. “Now you’re really incognito!”

Pete looked at his work in shock. “I’m sorry, Jupe. Why don’t you hold still?”

“Because you shave like a butcher, Pete!”

“Yes, yes, sorry! Do you want to go fully bald or should I leave it like that?” he asked.

Jupiter stroked his hand through the remaining hair on both sides of his head. “You mustn’t touch my head again! Never again!”

“Anyway, we come across as pretty weird,” Bob noted, “—a bit out of time, like natural scientists.”

“There are plenty of good-looking scientists,” Pete corrected. “What if those three guys recognize us anyway? Or anyone else?”

Jupiter said: “Then we have no choice but go for Plan B—open confrontation at the risk of not finding out anything more about the whole plot.”

They talked for a while longer. Then Bob grabbed Jupiter to do the dishes while Pete searched for more information about the platypus in the library books as assigned. The more they knew about it, the better the cover, Jupiter thought.

## 5. Bogus Pete

Once prepared, they set off the next morning for Barranco Road.

They had not slept well, especially Pete. He stared discontentedly through his old-fashioned glasses while Bob fiddled with his ponytail, deep in thought. Jupiter was at the wheel. Energetically he took curve after curve. He could hardly wait to finally face the three bogus investigators.

Shortly before ten o'clock, he turned into the street where Eric Nguyen's house was located. A few metres before the driveway, the First Investigator stopped and parked at the side of the road. The three of them got out and jammed their equipment under their arms. They left the bags with washing things and spare clothes in the car for the time being.

There was a door in the steel gate to Eric Nguyen's house. Next to it was a card reader and a bell on the wall. A camera was mounted above it, monitoring the entrance area. Jupiter pressed the button. Just as he was about to ring the bell again, a female voice sounded.

"Yes?"

Jupiter cleared his throat. "This is... Jonathan Miller. I'm here with my friends Stan and Mickey. Your neighbour across the street, Mr Baxter, said we should have a word with you."

"Ron Baxter?" she sounded surprised.

"Yes."

"What is it about?"

"We have a request, but can we discuss this in person?"

"Are you nature explorers?"

Only now did Jupiter look up at the camera. Ah! She can see them! And the insect nets too! "Yes, in a way," he replied.

"Okay, come on in, just follow the driveway."

A buzz sounded, and the door immediately swung open. The Three Investigators entered the grounds. The small driveway wound towards the house and then around it, past bushes with colourful blossoms and small hills planted simply with grass. The end point of the path was a small car park behind the house, where an aged Chevrolet gleamed in the sun. In passing, Juve took a look inside—sports shoes, fashionable jumper, and an empty soda can.

"The three bogus investigators are already here," Jupiter muttered.

Under a glass canopy, a step led to a large entrance door, which was opened at that moment.

The Three Investigators took a breath. Now it came down to it.

A boy stepped outside. Bob recognized him immediately. A little shorter than him, with blond frizzy hair—it was Bogus Bob. He wore nickel glasses on his nose.

Quickly, Bob tried to give his facial expression something trivial. Bogus Bob looked at The Three Investigators but without particularly focussing on Bob. Rather, he seemed to notice Jupiter's hairstyle, and the insect nets.

"What are you doing here? School trip?"

"We are here to see Mrs Willard," Jupiter said, "and who are you?"

"My name is Bob Andrews," the boy in the doorway said stiltedly. "Who are you?"

"Me?" Jupiter said, as if that hadn't been clear. "Jonathan Miller."

“Stan is my name,” Pete murmured. “Stan Young.”

“Mickey Jefferson,” Bob added quietly.

“All right. Make it quick, though. We’ve got work to do here.” Bogus Bob stepped aside and gave way.

Jupiter winked at Bob. The disguise had worked. Apparently they had not been recognized! One after the other, The Three Investigators entered the house.

The entrance area was friendly and bright. To the side, a staircase led to the upper floor. Opposite the entrance, a half-open door allowed a view into another room, the large window of which pointed directly to the canyon. The wheel of a wheelchair was visible. The smell of incense was unmistakable in the air.

“Come in,” a female voice called.

Pete went ahead. His gaze fell on a young woman. She had her black hair tied back in a braid, which made her slightly Asian-looking features stand out a little more. Her facial expression was difficult to interpret. She was sitting in a wheelchair and holding a piece of paper in her hand. The boy standing next to her also had an Asian appearance. Apparently the two of them had just been discussing something on the paper.

“We’ll sort it out later, Pete,” the woman said to the boy and put the paper on her lap. “Go to Jupiter and continue looking.”

Pete couldn’t help but stare at the boy for seconds. So this was his alter ego—Bogus Pete!

“What are you looking at me like that?” Bogus Pete hissed. He took a step forward and held up his arms in a martial arts stance. “Never seen a Vietnamese before?”

Pete quickly regained his composure. “Uh... sorry,” he said and tried to talk his way out of it by saying: “You just reminded me of someone. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

Without reacting, Bogus Pete pushed past Pete, but his gaze had lost its hardness. The boy ran into the hallway and they heard him going up the stairs to the upper floor.

“Pete is apparently a bit excitable,” the woman said kindly. She pointed to a rectangular table. The Three Investigators took a seat at it. The woman shifted her wheelchair to the side of the head, put the paper down on the table and looked round. “So? What’s it about?”

“I assume you are Mrs Willard,” Jupiter said, squinting at the paper at the same time. He could make out that the text was printed and there were little drawings by the side of each line.

The woman nodded and pulled the paper closer to her.

As curious as Jupiter was, he played it safe by not focussing on the paper. He turned to her completely and introduced himself and his friends with their cover names. Then he began to tell what they were here about.

“Platypuses?” Mrs Willard interrupted him.

Jupiter nodded. “Probably illegally imported and simply abandoned in nature.”

“I once travelled around Australia and saw some of these animals there—up in Queensland. Did you know that they are one of the few mammals that lay eggs?”

Jupiter nodded with a smile. “By knowing that, then you have an idea what a sensation it would be to find some of them here... in California!” he said with an excited tone.

“Indeed! There would be really crazy!”

“So far it’s pure speculation,” Jupiter said, “but it would be a dream to explore everything from your compound—ideally from your little cottage down by the canyon. Would you give us permission to do that?”

“In principle, yes.” Mrs Willard said, “but I also know that platypuses are nocturnal animals. What are you going to do here during the day?”

Bob responded quickly. “We will analyse the terrain of the canyon with regard to the living conditions of the animals, explore the best observation sites, determine fauna and flora—other animals and plants—and take some measurements like temperature profile, light conditions and, of course, water quality.”

Jupe gave Bob an appreciative look. That had sounded highly professional.

“I understand,” said Mrs Willard, “but you would have to go down to the valley. There’s a gate in the fence of the summer cottage, and a path that leads into the canyon.”

“Perfect!” said Jupiter. “Does that mean we can proceed?”

“Hold on...” Mrs Willard said. She was still hesitating. “Young researchers have to be supported, of course... that is, if platypuses live here, then...”

“Yes?” asked Jupiter.

“—Then would it arouse great interest?”

“Definitely,” said Jupiter. “With biologists, but also with many other curious people.”

“I might be able to rent out the summer cottage for visitors of all kinds.”

Jupiter listened up. Was she looking for company or did she need money?

“As long as people don’t disturb the animals, there’s nothing wrong with it,” he said.

“Mrs Willard, you are thinking of some kind of nature tourism?”

The lady nodded. “You know, my uncle died recently. Maybe Mr Baxter told you. Please don’t be surprised that I’m not sitting here crying. I’ve hardly seen him for years, but I suppose I shall inherit everything here. Only I have no idea what to do with this house. It costs quite a bit to maintain, and I don’t know if I have enough money for that.”

“I can imagine that,” Jupiter said. “Your uncle must have been very wealthy.”

She laughed briefly. “He owned a small fast food restaurant in town—Sun Pho, down near the shopping centre. Maybe you know it.” She took a breath and looked past The Three Investigators out the window. “Surely he couldn’t have afforded all this from that! He’s always been a person who liked to keep his secrets. Whoever I asked, no one knows what he was doing that awful day of the accident.” She swallowed and focused on Jupiter again. “Anyway, if I can find a source of income, I won’t have to sell all this!”

“We haven’t found the animals yet,” Jupiter said.

Mrs Willard leaned forward and smiled. “You can make yourselves at home in the summer cottage... and I very much wish that you will succeed!”

“I hope so too,” said Jupe, “as long as the ghosts don’t disturb us...”

“Ghosts?” Mrs Willard jerked her head back. “What do you know about it?”

“Oh, nothing really,” Jupiter said as unconcerned as possible. “Mr Baxter mentioned it briefly to us. He suspects that’s why those three boys are here—Pete, Bob and—” Jupiter coughed.

“Why, that Mr Baxter!” exclaimed Mrs Willard. “I wish I hadn’t told him. What an unsympathetic fellow! And he talks so badly of people. When I got here, I thought I had to get on good terms with all the neighbours first.”

“Do the ghosts have something to do with that paper?” asked Jupiter, pointing to the paper on the table.

Suddenly Mrs Willard looked very reserved. “That’s not important now. You don’t need to be afraid of ghosts either, especially as it is not a ghost, but a spirit. He accompanies me and I see him in the evening when I go to sleep. I don’t think he will disturb you.”

“Where does he appear?” asked Pete.

“He hovers by the window.” She cleared her throat. “I can see why you’d be interested but there’s nothing special about it. Everything else is in good hands... especially with those young, capable investigators. They call themselves The Three Investigators.”

“A clever idea of yours to have them investigate,” Bob said casually. “I’m sure the police wouldn’t take such phenomena as ghosts seriously at all.”

“I guess you’re right,” Mrs Willard said, but the answer had sounded hesitant.

“I could see that those three... uh... investigators look very young,” Pete said, looking innocently over the rim of his glasses. “—About our age, I guess. How did you engage them?”

Mrs Willard ran her hand through her hair. “A friend once read a newspaper article about them. She said she remembered that their investigation agency is in Rocky Beach. Well, I wrote to the editor of *Rocky Beach Today* and enclosed a letter for him to forward to The Three Investigators. The papers wrote the article about them, so they would know where to find them. Why is this of interest to you?”

“Well,” Jupiter said, “our interest is mainly about nature and biology.”

“—But investigator stories are also very exciting,” Pete added, “especially since we never dream of doing anything like that. We are always studying for school, and it takes a lot out of us. I guess your idea writing to the editor was clever! So I suppose the papers then forwarded your letter to them?”

“Exactly, and right away the investigators called!”

At that moment, a boy stepped into the doorway. He was tall, blond, and had a perfect short haircut. That had to be Bogus Jupiter!



## 6. Bogus Jupiter

Bogus Jupiter cast a sceptical glance at the piece of paper still on the table. “Sorry, Mrs Willard, I forgot something!”

“Is it about the riddle?” Mrs Willard asked.

“Exactly,” Bogus Jupiter replied. “I have to check on something.”

“This chap doesn’t trust us,” Jupiter thought to himself. Immediately, the First Investigator turned and looked at the paper to try to read the text.

However, Bogus Jupiter did not miss how intensely Jupiter was staring at the paper. “Who are you?” he asked, stepping closer. “Seems like you come from some curious remote tribe...”

Jupe quickly looked away from the paper and said: “—From a biology class. I’m looking at a drawing of a *Pinus sylvestris* leaf.”

“A what leaf?” Bogus Jupiter exclaimed. “I bet you just made that up!”

“You don’t believe me?” asked Jupiter, playfully indignant. “This is a leaf from an evergreen coniferous tree. I know my way around such things. You’re welcome to see my school work.”

“I can really think of more exciting things to do.”

“But maybe these boys can even help us,” Mrs Willard interjected.

“I hardly think so!” The tall blond boy snatched the paper from the table. “I’m sure you don’t know anything we don’t already know.” Hostilely, he glared at the First Investigator. “Say, did you cut your own hair?”

Jupiter pretended not to notice the provocation. “It doesn’t matter what someone looks like,” he said, tilting his head innocently and making googly eyes. “With us, it’s like a breakfast egg. It’s the inner values that count... and good grades, of course! I want to be an important researcher one day—like the ones you always see on TV, who gets to go on great expeditions.”

“I hope your expedition here is now over.” With a grim expression on his face, Bogus Jupiter turned to Mrs Willard. “We can’t work with so many people hanging around!”

“We’re not hanging around,” Jupiter countered, playfully indignant. “We’re doing research!”

“The boys will go to the summer cottage,” Mrs Willard said, “and look for rare animals—platypuses.”

“Excuse me? But—” Bogus Jupiter wanted to protest.

“I’m allowing them to go there,” Mrs Willard told him off.

“Of course. Sorry. We just want to help you as quickly as possible.”

“I know,” Mrs Willard said soothingly, “and I appreciate you three helping me without taking a fee. Can I get you something nice? How about banana cake? You’d like it!”

“I won’t say no to that,” replied Bogus Jupiter, smiling wryly.

“I will ask one of the boys to bring it to you.”

“Thank you. I’ll go back upstairs then,” the tall boy said and walked off, holding the piece of paper with the strange text like a trophy.

“You too?” the woman asked. “I mean would you like some cake?”

“Yes, with pleasure,” Jupiter hurried to say. “Food is always good!”

“I have some in the kitchen,” Mrs Willard said. “Banana cake is a Vietnamese speciality! Mickey—that’s your name, isn’t it? Would you please push me to the kitchen?”

Bob realized Mrs Willard meant him and jumped up. “Of course!”

The woman turned to Jupiter and Pete. “Did you come in a car?”

Jupiter nodded.

“You can drive in and park your car right next to the summer cottage. Have you brought everything you need?”

“Yes—cameras, binoculars, night-vision device,” Juve said, “we have everything on board, as befits real nature explorers!”

She laughed. “I was thinking more of stuff for overnight stay.”

“I see. That’s not so important. We’ll work it out somehow!”

“Whatever you say, the beds are made up. Ring the bell if you want to come back in.”

After the two had gone off, Bob stepped behind the wheelchair. “Which way?” he asked.

“The kitchen is on the right,” Mrs Willard said. “Of course I can manage down here on my own, but it’s quite pleasant to have someone push me for a change. Too bad I hurt both my knees.”

“How did that actually happen?” asked Bob.

“I hit gravel while riding my bike and fell.”

“So how do you go upstairs now?”

Mrs Willard looked at Bob in confusion.

“I mean, I presumed that your bedroom is upstairs and wondered how you go up the stairs.”

“Oh! I’ve temporarily set up down here in the guest room,” she said. “I don’t need to go upstairs until I’m better.”

“That’s good,” Bob said and wheeled Mrs Willard down the hall into the kitchen. A large picture of lotus roots hung above the sideboard.

Sounds came down from the upper floor. It sounded as if furniture was being moved.

“They’re pretty thorough,” Bob said, “but I doubt you can drive away a ghost like that.”

“The boys are not driving away ghosts,” Mrs Willard explained, rolling over to the sideboard. “In fact, I’m not afraid of the ghost that haunts me either. I see his image before me every night. It’s my late uncle, you see.”

“Oh!” said Bob in surprise.

“Yeah, you can’t imagine, can you?” Mrs Willard laughed and pointed to the fridge. “No, the boys are here to search for some items left by my uncle. Thanks to Li, I know about it.”

“Li?”

“Yes, Li. She advises my uncle on spiritual matters. As a Vietnamese, she knows her way around... and now she is my spiritual advisor. She helped me set up the altar upstairs for my uncle and explained to me the funeral customs. By the way, she’ll be here in a minute. It’s time for me to pour the tea. Would you get the cake out, please?”

Bob suddenly had many questions on the tip of his tongue—in particular, the items and the altar—but how far could he go without making Mrs Willard suspicious? After all, he was not officially there to investigate.

“I don’t know much about spiritual matters,” Bob said. “I’m glad we’re only here to look for animals.”

“It has to do with our faith,” said Mrs Willard. “I’m half-Vietnamese. In the last days of the war, some of my family members came to America because they were on the US side in the war.”

Bob nodded. Of course he knew about the terrible Vietnam War, which was many years ago.

"I never cared much about history, but since my divorce, that has changed. I'm discovering old Asian truths and my Asian roots after denying them all my life."

"Then it's great that you were able to get assistance from your uncle's advisor," Bob said as casually as possible. "I'm sure she can give you the best introduction to Vietnamese culture."

"Yes, I am very grateful to her!" Mrs Willard put the teapot and cups on a tray. "With me being on a wheelchair now, she takes care of the altar upstairs. Regularly the incense sticks have to be lit, otherwise I lose contact with my uncle."

So that's where the intense smell in the house came from. Bob waited to see if Mrs Willard would reveal any more information. Instead, she now lifted the cover of the cake. "Please cut three pieces for The Three Investigators and there should be enough for you three as well."

"Do you want me to take the cake to the... uh... investigators upstairs?"

Mrs Willard nodded. "You don't have to worry. Jupiter may have been a little upset just now. Don't be angry with him. He is a clever boy, but he is sometimes a bit harsh, even with his two friends. Seems to me that he wants to show how smart he is."

"I can well imagine that," said Bob. The opportunity to bring up the cake upstairs was something he could not miss. Perhaps he could inconspicuously observe and eavesdrop on the bogus investigators at work.

"Li will be here in a minute..." murmured Mrs Willard, rolling over to the kitchen shelf. "She's always hungry. Somewhere I still have some *phở*..."

"*Phở*?"

"Vietnamese noodle soup."

Bob picked up the tray with cakes, plates and cutlery and left the room with it. Carefully, he climbed the stairs.

When Bob reached the upper floor, his eyes fell on a small dark side table that stood against the opposite wall. It was the altar, but it was not the table itself that caught his attention, it was rather the objects lying on it. All sorts of things were draped around a photo, presumably of the dead man, so that it looked like a gift table.

Bob stepped closer. He saw flowers, a doll, small bottles of porcelain and glass, jars, burning incense, a bowl of fruit and also a menu from a restaurant—Sun Pho. There was even a wad of money in between. Bob put his tray on the floor and quickly took a photo of the altar with his mobile phone.

A muffled voice was heard. Bob picked up the tray again and looked around. A door stood open. It led into a bright fitness room whose outer wall was completely glazed. Three other doors were closed. The voice of Bogus Jupiter came from the middle room.

Cautiously, Bob stepped closer. Now he was near enough to hear what was being said.

"Look at the wall," Bogus Jupiter said.

A scratching sound was heard. "But I can't get the bedside table away, Luke!"

"Don't call me Luke! You're going to blow our cover sooner or later, you bum! My name is Jupiter!"

"Yes, yes... Jupiter!" Then there was that sound again, followed by a groan.

Bob put his ear to the door so he could hear better.

"Now I have it. There's no hiding place in the wall, but there's a strange wooden box. It was under the bedside table..." There was a pause. "Tell me, those three guys who showed up just now, what do you think of them?"

“Those nerds? I don’t know! Anyway, they get on my nerves, especially that fat guy with weeds on his head. I don’t like the fact that they can run around the grounds. We’ve got to get rid of them somehow. Where is Pete, by the way?”

Pete? ... As in Bogus Pete? Bob almost dropped the tray in shock. Bogus Pete wasn’t in the room?

## 7. The Doll

At that moment, Bob received a well-aimed blow from behind. The tray together with the cake, plates and cutlery flew to the floor with a clatter. He felt a pain in his side and slumped. For a moment, he could not breathe.

From downstairs, Mrs Willard shouted: "Goodness, what happened?"

Bob lay between the pieces of banana cake and saw the attacker standing over him wide-legged and grinning.

"Don't worry, Mrs Willard," cried Bogus Pete. "Mickey just slipped. Too bad about the banana cake. I'll fix it all up!"

Bob got up with a groan. Obviously, Bogus Pete wasn't just bouncing around for fun, but really knew something about martial arts.

Something also crashed to the floor in the room. Then the door was torn open. The dogged face of Bogus Jupiter appeared, underpinned by a strong sweetish scent that drifted from the room. "Oh no! A fat bug! Well done, Pete!"

Slowly Bob could breathe normally again. "I... I didn't mean to eavesdrop," he stammered, realizing at the same time how stupid that sounded. It was much more obvious to tell part of the truth: "Yes. Yes, I admit it. I was just curious, would like to know what you are looking for here!"

"Obviously not platypuses," said Bogus Jupiter, whose name was Luke.

"Quiet, Jupiter," said Bogus Pete, pointing downstairs.

At that moment, Mrs Willard called out: "Are you sure you're all right?"

"It's all good!" Bogus Pete replied.

Luke told Bob to get up. As he did so, Bob managed to get a glimpse of the room. On the floor was the metal detector. In front of a shifted bedside cabinet, Bogus Bob knelt on the floor and looked at it. A splintered wooden box and several small bottles lay before him. One of them was broken. The sweetly tart scent was so strong that it even masked the incense smoke.

"What we do here is none of your business," Bogus Jupiter said to Bob. "You're a little too curious for me! You're looking for rare animals here? Really? Someone sent you, isn't it?"

"No," Bob muttered, holding his stomach. "Uh... yes."

"So, what is it? No or yes?"

"Our teacher," said Bob, "he's assigned us to come here... We'll get a really good grade for our school work..."

"What kind of school do you actually go to?" asked Luke.

"Cape Anna Private School," it came like a shot from a gun. Jupiter had checked on this and briefed his two friends.

"A private school!" Luke screwed up his face contemptuously. "If you're snooping around here into things that don't concern you, I'll tell Mrs Willard. She won't like it, and then you're out!" He gave a dirty laugh. "I dropped out of biology, you know, but I'm good at kickboxing, especially when it comes to confronting curious nerds!"

Bob took a breath. "Thanks for the tip," he said, got to his feet and staggered down the stairs.

Mrs Willard was already waiting for him there. "What happened? Are you okay?"

"Yes," Bob said tersely, trying to keep his composure. "I slipped. The tray fell down. The boys upstairs will clean it all up."

"That's really nice of them," Mrs Willard said. "Do you think you can open the front door? The doorbell rang. It's probably Li."

"Of course!" Bob groaned and opened the door.

Waiting outside were Jupiter and Pete and a woman perhaps forty years old, under whose thick black pageboy haircut stood out an almost ageless face with round, fine features. Then Bob's gaze was drawn to the luminous purple of her simple but elegant dress, which was beaming with the sun.

"Li!" exclaimed Mrs Willard delightedly.

"Alice! So good to see you! I hear you have visitors..." Li pointed to Jupiter and Pete. "I let them through the gate with my card and we had a quick chat."

"Yes, the boys are biology students and are looking for a rare animal... Come on in! Eric appeared again last night!"

"Let's discuss everything inside in peace," Li said. "How are things going with The Three Investigators?"

"They are looking very carefully," said Mrs Willard. She turned to The Three Investigators. "You can go on to the summer cottage. The door key is there. Oh, and don't forget the cake!"

Bob disappeared into the kitchen while Jupe and Pete stayed outside. Li and Mrs Willard moved to the terrace.

When Bob stepped out in front of the house with the cake, Jupiter was just inspecting Li's car. It was an inconspicuous, well-maintained orange Kia.

"Except for a briefcase on the back seat, there's nothing in it," Jupiter said disappointedly. He pulled out his camera and snapped a photo of the car's interior.

Pete had his eyes on the house. Just then Luke's face appeared in the window. "Come on, let's go to the cottage," he said quickly.

They climbed into the Beetle. Bob got behind the wheel, with Jupiter at the back, and Pete in the passenger seat. As they had seen from above the day before, a narrow road led right through a group of trees and past a pond to the canyon. As they rolled along the slightly sloping terrain, Bob summarized how he had fared.

"We have to find out what Mrs Willard and Li have to talk about," Jupiter said afterwards. "If we pass the clump of trees, we will be shielded from their view for a short time. Pete, you jump out and make your way back to the house. Bob and I will continue on to the cottage and park where we can't be seen."

"And how am I supposed to make my way back to the house unseen?"

"I'll come up with a diversion," Bob said. "You use the time to get to the house unseen."

Bob imperceptibly slowed down. When they were between the trees, he braked briefly. "Get out now!" Bob told Pete.

Pete jumped out of the still slightly rolling car and pushed the door shut. Immediately Bob drove on.

With a pounding heart, Pete watched the Beetle. In a moment it would pass the pond, in which a small single-storey wooden building also with a pagoda roof and Asian decorations had been set on stilts.

Suddenly the Beetle left the road and bumped across the lawn. It started to lurch and was now heading straight for the pond. The engine howled. There was even a backfire that rang across the park like a whiplash.

That was the moment! Pete turned around and ran off crouching. To the right, the terrain sloped down towards the sea. This would give him privacy. He passed a few miniature trees and beautifully placed flowering bushes and after a short while, he reached the opposite area of the property. No bogus investigator or anyone else was peering out of the back windows.

Pete carefully pushed his way along the wall. His destination was the terrace to which Mrs Willard and Li had retreated.

A short time later, he reached a large, floor-to-ceiling window. In front of it, a cotton-like screen was stretched inside, so that one could not see in. At the end of the window, however, a small gap allowed a glimpse into the room. Pete saw part of an extended couch covered with bedding. It had to be Mrs Willard's bedroom.

From here, it was only a short distance to the corner of the house behind which the terrace lay. Mrs Willard's voice could already be heard, but Pete could not yet understand what she was saying. Cautiously, he crept forward.

"You really have nothing to worry about, Alice!" Now it was Li who spoke. Pete was now at the corner of the house. "I'm sure Eric wants to tell you that everything is all right. You called the investigators. His soul will find peace because you're taking care of it. Have you made any progress with the riddle?"

"No, but The Three Investigators are searching everywhere. Maybe the other boys can help us. They seem to have their hearts in the right place when they care about animals like that."

"Those three from earlier? Can't it wait until they find what they are looking for?"

"I would like it if they found those animals. Maybe this will also lead to a job for me. I could rent out the summer cottage to animal watchers and..."

"Oh, Alice!" Li interrupted. "Don't dream! The first thing that should be on our minds now are the items Eric left behind." Pete heard a chair being pushed back. "I'm going to call The Three Investigators now. It's time to check on their progress."

The Second Investigator tensed his muscles. What he had heard so far was still not very conclusive.

After a few moments, Li returned with the three bogus investigators in tow.

"Sit down," Mrs Willard said. Chairs were pushed.

"How far have you come?" asked Li.

"The riddle is difficult," replied Bogus Jupiter, "but for The Three Investigators, there are no riddles that are too difficult!"

Mrs Willard laughed briefly. Then she said: "I still don't understand why Eric left me such a task, simply to find some hidden items... much so with this intricate riddle. He had to know I couldn't solve it."

"Some progress has been made. The document is upstairs," Bogus Jupiter said. "Pete, go and get it!"

"No need to," Li interrupted. "You'd better tell me first where you've already looked!"

So, the riddle document is upstairs—it went through Pete's head... and everyone is downstairs. What a chance! As quietly and as quickly as he could, he crept around the house. When he stepped onto the forecourt, he pulled out his lock pick set. However, he was surprised that the main door was ajar! Had Li forgotten to close it?

No matter. Pete carefully opened the door wider and slipped in quietly.

Bob was grinning up to his ears. The backfire had been the highlight! The Beetle hopped across the park. To be on the safe side, he stalled the engine twice more. He then steered the car in curves back onto the road.

Jupiter had clung to the front seat. "A truly excellent performance," he commented, "even to the point of almost making me sick!"

"Hopefully it was enough of a distraction." Bob stepped on the accelerator a little, and shortly they reached the summer cottage.

It was a simple cottage built of wood with a footprint of maybe ten by fifteen metres. Bob circled the forecourt once and then parked at one side of the cottage. From the main house, the only thing that could be seen was the back of the Beetle.

He got out and walked to the front door where the key was, as promised. Then he pretended to wave to Jupiter and called out: "You can take the stuff to the verandah now!" It didn't matter to Bob that he probably couldn't be heard in the main house at all. Everything had to look authentic.

The summer cottage had two rooms. The one Bob entered directly through the door had a cupboard and a simple kitchen. Next to it was a kind of living-sleeping room combination with a wide pull-out sofa, above which hung a photo calendar. Otherwise, the walls were bare. A double-glazed door led to the verandah, where Jupiter was already there, holding a mobile phone in his hand. Bob went to the door, opened it, and stepped out onto the verandah.

Jupiter pointed at the phone. "This is Pete's phone," he said sullenly. "It must have slipped out of his pocket while he was still in the car. Now he might not be able to call us for help."

"I hope he's not risking too much," Bob replied, "because Bogus Pete is not to be trifled with. If we don't hear from our Pete in half an hour, we'll have to check on him."

"Agreed."

Together they carried the luggage into the cottage. Then Jupiter strolled to the far edge of the verandah, which he realized could be seen from the main house. He set up the telescope with tripod and positioned it near the railing.

Bob, meanwhile, had poured water into two glasses and went back onto the verandah. In front of them was the small canyon. At the bottom of the valley was a stream. In fact, they had an excellent view of it, even if a few trees and bushes prevented a complete view of the stream. The water glistened in the sun.

"So, have you spotted a platypus yet?" asked Jupe with a grin.

"Not yet." Bob pressed a water glass into his friend's hand. "Say, what do you think of those three imposters?"

Jupiter took a sip and looked into the canyon. "Unfriendly and not very bright. No doubt they are looking for something—something to do with the late Eric Nguyen. Apparently Mrs Willard has hired the bogus investigators because she is hardly mobile herself due to her injury. I wonder who got those guys for her and for what purpose..."

"I could call the newspaper," Bob said. "They supposedly put us up. We know the people who work there. Maybe someone can remember the letter."

"Good idea, Bob... and we need to find out more about the imposters."

"Bogus Jupiter's real name is Luke. I overheard that."

"Luke..." Jupiter screwed up his face. "When we were waiting for you, I jammed the tracking transmitter under their car. I hope we can intercept them when they go off and then follow them." He narrowed his eyes. Something had moved in the stream below. It fluttered and flew up. It was a bird.



“Did you read the riddle?” asked Bob.

Jupiter shook his head. “I did not have enough time. There were text, characters, and drawings. We need a photo of it... or even better, the original—so that we can deal with it calmly. There may be clues that are not visible to the naked eye. Unfortunately, I expect that Luke will prevent us from getting the riddle document.”

“And what do you think of Li? She seems to be some kind of esoteric counsellor.”

“At the moment, I don’t trust anyone.” Jupiter thought. “Didn’t you mention a photo you took?”

“Oh yes!” Bob pulled out his phone. “—The altar. Wait...” He searched for the photo and pressed the phone into Jupiter’s hand.

“There’s a framed photo on the table,” the First Investigator noted. “Could be Eric Nguyen... and with it, things that the deceased is supposed to take with him to the realm of the dead. Do we have Internet reception here? I don’t know much about the funeral customs of the Vietnamese. Most people in Vietnam are Buddhist, but there are also Christians and believers of other religions, and it all mixes with ancient ancestral customs.”

“Let’s check it out,” Bob said.

Once Pete was inside the house, he stopped and had to get used to the dim light. The voices from the terrace reached him very quietly, especially Bogus Jupiter was easy to hear from the conversation.

The Second Investigator sucked in the air. A sweet-sweet scent mingled with the smell of the incense sticks. His gaze wandered.

Next to the entrance was a chest of drawers with a few stamped envelopes leaning against a Buddha statue. Pete picked them up and looked through them. There were four letters—two were addressed to Mrs Willard, and two were outgoing letters from her to insurance companies. He put the envelopes back down and looked up the stairs. Up there was where Bob had been surprised by the three bogus investigators.

Step by step Pete crept up. Even before he reached the top of the stairs, his eyes fell on the altar with the items that Bob had mentioned. Curious, Pete stepped closer. Long sticks of incense were smoking away. Between the fruit bowl and a vase lay banknotes. Pete took the bundle in his hand. “Hmm... not real money,” he muttered.

Something crackled in the house. Pete looked around. There was no one to be seen. A doll attracted him as if by magic. It stood next to a menu of a Vietnamese restaurant. The doll was about thirty centimetres tall, made of wood, and painted. The finely crafted expression on the face of the doll reminded him of someone. Involuntarily, his gaze fell on the photo of the deceased. There it was—the same prominent chin. Was the doll a likeness of the dead man?

Pete wanted to pull out his mobile phone to take a photo, but it was not in his pocket! A shock ran through him. Had he lost it on the way here? Or maybe he dropped it in Bob’s car—if so, that would be the best outcome! In any case, he could not take a photo.

He weighed the doll in his hand, and shook it. Did it contain a secret? Maybe he could... borrow the doll for a moment and return it later. With a quick decision, he clipped it under his belt.

Then he looked around further. There were pieces of cake in front of one of the doors. This must be where the fight had taken place. Pete crept over to it. The door was only ajar. He listened. Voices still sounded softly from the terrace. So Pete opened the door.

The sweet-tart smell was very strong in here. The bed had been moved away from the wall, the bedside table was in the middle of the room and a book lay open on the floor with its spine facing upwards next to a metal detector.

But most of all, on the rumpled bedspread, was the riddle document. Pete entered and quietly leaned the door back. He went to the bed, took the document, smoothed it out, and looked at it. He groaned softly. This looked complicated! Too bad he couldn't photograph it!

Pete looked around the room and saw a table at one corner on which were placed several dolls. He walked nearer to get a closer look. As with the one he took from the altar, the dolls were about the same size, made of wood and painted. They were featured with traditional colourful Asian clothing and headgear. In particular, there were three dolls in some sort of military clothing. Pete thought that they could well represent the three bogus investigators.

Suddenly, a clattering could be heard from downstairs. Probably someone was just getting something out of the kitchen. Nevertheless, Pete looked around for places to hide. He couldn't fit under the modern bed. He saw, standing to the side next to the window, a folding screen decorated with strange characters.

Wait a minute! Did he hear footsteps? He listened. Yes. Quiet footsteps. They were not downstairs... but up here—out in the corridor!

Or was he already hearing ghosts?

Pete grabbed the document and hastily rolled it up. Like a cat, he crept behind the screen—just in time too.

With his last glance at the door, Pete saw it slowly being pulled open.

## 8. Pete Holds His Breath

Someone entered the room. Pete clearly felt the presence of the other person. He was panting slightly... but he moved like a silent animal. Now he was at the bedside, exactly at the place where Pete had just been standing.

The longitudinal bars of the joints on the screen left a narrow slit through which Pete could peer. He held his breath in surprise. It was not one of the bogus investigators, as he had suspected, nor was it Li!

A small, wiry-looking man had his back on Pete. The intruder lifted the bedspread and gently lowered it again and then crept to the bedside table. Then he bent down and searched the floor, picked up the book, and put it down.

Still Pete could not make out the intruder's face. What caught his eye was the elegant dark jacket, which had a blue collar, and the strange swirl of hair that stuck out from the back of the intruder's head like a triangle. Surely this was the man they had pursued in vain yesterday!

The intruder straightened up and took a deep breath of air. This strange, beguiling smell irritated him too. Now he took a step to the side and disappeared from view. Pete heard glass clinking, like two bottles knocking against each other. Then suddenly the footsteps came closer. A dark shadow was already looming on the screen, becoming sharper and sharper.

The Second Investigator prepared for an attack. He knew some fighting techniques. The most important thing was that he used the element of surprise.

Sounds came from downstairs again—kitchen noises. Then a woman's voice called out: "I'll bring it outside for you!"

The man at the screen hesitated. The shadow became more indistinct again, finally dissolving completely. Pete felt the breeze as the door to the room was pulled open and closed completely shortly afterwards.

The Second Investigator breathed a sigh of relief. The situation had turned around. Now he, Pete, was the hunter. Should he pursue the intruder?

Pete's hand still clutched the riddle document. Determined, he stepped out from behind the screen, crossed the room and opened the door a gap. There was no sign of the man. Had he hidden somewhere?

With tense muscles, Pete strode into the hallway, ready to defend himself... but nothing happened. Barely audibly, the front door clicked into the lock downstairs. Apparently the intruder had left.

Pete hurried to the stairs. The voices from the kitchen were now clearly audible. "I'll be off then," Li said just as Pete was mid-way on the stairs.

Mrs Willard replied from the terrace: "See you tonight, if it's not too late!"

Pete stopped. Here on the stairs, he was on full view. Retreat or escape? He thought about it in a flash. Probably the bogus investigators were about to come back up. Then they would discover that the riddle document was missing. Then there would surely be an alarm in the house. Pete had the riddle document and this strange doll was stuck in his belt. Everything pointed to escape.

“Oh, Li?” cried Mrs Willard. “Wait a minute. Can you bring me some new incense sticks?”

It’s now or never.

The moment had been enough. Almost silently, Pete ran down the stairs, pulled open the door, and slipped out. There was no sign of the man. Pete sprinted towards one of the ornamental bushes and hid behind it.

A few seconds later, Li stepped out of the house, got into her car and drove away.

Pete clenched his fist around the riddle document. “Yes!” he shouted inside himself. “Yes, yes, yes!”

He had done well. Although his missing mobile phone worried him, the mission had been worth it. Jupiter and Bob would be amazed!

As the man had apparently disappeared, Pete chose the same route he had come. As he covered the last few metres to the group of trees, the Second Investigator heard Bob’s Beetle start up. He reached the trees and positioned himself behind the greenery so that he could be seen from the car.

Bob was at the wheel, and no one else was in the car. The Beetle rolled up. When Bob saw Pete, he braked and quickly let his friend get in.

“We were worried,” Bob said as Pete slid into the seat beside him. “I was just coming to check on you!”

“No need to...”

“You dropped your mobile phone! Since we didn’t know if you’d get into trouble again, I started a rescue operation.” Bob turned and drove out of the woods back towards the summer cottage.

“Me? Trouble?” Pete laughed. “Everything was completely in control. I’ve got the riddle document!”

“Really?”

“Yes! The original!” Pete unrolled the riddle document.

Bob almost went off the road in shock.

“And what have you done in the meantime?” asked Pete, emphatically nonchalant.

“We set up the platypus observation post, found out about Vietnamese funeral customs and called *Rocky Beach Today*. There was only one journalist there—the very one who interviewed us. He, at least, couldn’t remember receiving any letter from Mrs Willard, nor forwarding any letter to us. There’s something fishy about the story. The journalist still wants to ask his colleagues, but my guess is that they won’t know anything either!”

They passed the pond with the Asian wooden building. Directly on the bank opposite, two small rows of seats had been built into the hillside. It looked like a mini theatre.

“The backfire manoeuvre was fantastic, by the way,” Pete said. “Congratulations!”

Bob laughed. “Surprised me too. It must be because Jupiter’s uncle meddled the engine the other day...”

They reached the summer cottage and got out. Jupiter was waiting for them on the verandah. He was pinching his lower lip impatiently. Immediately his gaze fell on the riddle document. His eyes sparkled. “You have the original?”

“Of course!” said Pete. “And no one saw me. Although the strange man almost surprised me in the bedroom upstairs. I think it was the man from yesterday!” Pete reported what had happened.

“Excellent!” said Jupiter. “However, the fact that you acquired the riddle document carries a certain risk—they might suspect us, but if we’re lucky, the three bogus investigators will also accuse each other. After all, they think the three of us are here in the cottage. That

Luke is suspicious enough. Let them worry about it! And what about the doll?” Jupiter pointed to Pete’s belt, under which the wooden doll was stuck that he had ‘borrowed’ from the altar.

“It has a resemblance to Eric Nguyen,” Pete said and handed the doll to Jupiter. “You’re always interested in that kind of thing!”

“Bob took a photo of the table earlier,” Jupe said, “so I already have that information. The fact that you took the riddle document with you is very good—but then what’s with the doll? That’s very tricky, Pete!”

“Well, I didn’t know about the photo, and Mrs Willard couldn’t even go up the stairs while on a wheelchair.”

“But Li or the three impostors may notice that it is missing. At the next opportunity, you put it back in its place!”

“I just had a hunch that the doll was important,” said Pete. “Maybe it contains a secret!”

Jupiter paused and shook the doll. No sound. “Don’t tell me about hunches, Pete! It’s all too speculative for me. Let’s deal with the riddle instead. That’s more concrete!”

“Shall we go in?” asked Bob.

“It’s a bit dark inside,” Pete commented.

“At the side of the main door, I saw a switch of some kind for the blinds,” Bob said. “Perhaps we could lower them.”

“Nope,” Jupiter said. “It’s a key-operated switch. We don’t have the key to lower the blinds. Anyway, let’s stay out here on the verandah.”

After these words, the First Investigator unrolled the document, held it against the sunlight, then laid it flat on the table and bent over it.

The text was computer printed on the paper. As Jupe noted earlier, by the side of the lines were many small drawings. Now he could see that they were all hand-drawn. There were furniture, plants, animals and fantasy creatures like dragons or sea monsters.

The first part of the text was in English:

*She was speeding along the mountain road. The Volvo swerved to the left to overtake her. They wanted to push her to the right into the deep abyss...*

“Sounds like a detective story,” Jupe remarked. “Now look at the text below:”

*Cơ hội chỉ đến một lần,  
Vạn sự khởi đầu nan.  
Rau nào sâu nấy,  
Ăn quả nhớ kẻ trồng cây.*

*Cùng tắc biển, biển tắc thông,  
Muộn còn hơn không.  
Trèo cao, té nặng,  
Lời nói là bạc, im lặng là vàng.*

“I presume this is Vietnamese,” Pete said.

“Yes, it is,” Jupe replied.

“But they are basically Latin characters with all those funny marks on many of them,” Pete wondered. “I thought most Asian languages have their own characters.”

“Yes, for many of them,” Jupe said, “except that some time ago, Vietnam adopted the Latin script for their writing system... and these funny marks are diacritics. They are used to

indicate a specific pronunciation of that letter.”

“How are you going to get this translated?” Pete asked.

“Well,” Jupiter began, “since they are Latin characters, I should be able to find them as special characters in a word processing software. Then I’ll either put the sentences directly into a search engine or an Internet translation service. I’ll see how it goes.”

Jupiter went into the cottage and got his laptop. While he was busy with the translation, Pete and Bob fiddled with the equipment they brought.

After a long while, the First Investigator was satisfied with the results.

“Okay, I have to say that this task was tricky,” Jupe said. “All of the lines have been directly translated. They all seem to be proverbs, so for some of them, I managed to find the equivalent English proverbs, and I used them rather than the direct translations. Anyway, I’m done with it now.”

Jupe read out the translation:

*Opportunity only comes once,  
Getting started is always hard.  
A tree is known by its fruit,  
When eating fruits, remember the growers’ efforts.*

*When the going gets tough, the tough gets going,  
Better late than never.  
The higher you climb, the harder you fall,  
Speech is silver, but silence is gold.*

“Phew!” said Pete. “I suppose the solution to the riddle is in these lines.”

“They do sound like proverbs,” Bob said.

Suddenly, The Three Investigators were abruptly interrupted in their thoughts. Beeps came from their tracking receiver!

## 9. Eavesdropping!

“The bogus investigators are going somewhere!” Pete exclaimed.

The three boys jumped up. Quickly, the Second Investigator stuffed the wooden doll into the tripod case. Jupiter hastily hid the riddle document under a cookbook in the kitchen and Bob grabbed the sports bag with their equipment. A short time later, Bob started his Beetle.

He drove across the property as fast as the narrow path allowed. “How do we get through the gate?”

“Li said it opens automatically when you drive out,” Pete said. “Only if you want to get in, you either need an access card or have to ring the bell.”

“Well, step on it, Bob!” Jupiter urged.

The car reached the house. At that moment, the front door opened. Involuntarily, Bob stepped on the brakes.

It was Mrs Willard who came through the door on her wheelchair and waved excitedly at The Three Investigators.

“Bummer!” A few metres away, Bob came to a stop and rolled down the side window. “What is it, Mrs Willard?”

Jupiter looked nervously at the receiver. It had just given a signal again, after it had been gone for a short time before.

“I need help,” cried Alice. “The incense sticks!”

“Excuse me?” Bob thought he had misheard.

“The Three Investigators have forgotten to light new incense sticks. When the incense goes out, I lose contact with Eric!”

Bob looked at Jupiter, who rolled his eyes. “We’re in a hurry,” he called outside.

“Nothing can be as important as that! Not even platypuses!” Mrs Willard rolled forward a little, coming dangerously close to the step in front of the entrance with one wheel.

“Watch out!” shouted Bob.

Now Jupiter opened the passenger door, jumped out and put the seat forward. “Stan will help you, Mrs Willard.”

“What’s the idea?” Pete did not move a millimetre.

“Get a move on!” hissed Jupiter quietly. “We don’t have time! Light those things and keep looking around. Bob and I can handle this on our own!”

With a pinched face, Pete obeyed. He climbed outside, Jupiter got back into the car and Bob sped away.

Pete watched them for a moment, then forced himself to smile and walked towards Mrs Willard.

“Why are you in such a hurry?” the lady asked.

“Uh... our teacher wanted to meet us right away... as he has to leave on the bus soon!” Pete stuttered. “Wait! I’ll turn you around and push you back inside.”

The scent of incense was still in the air when Pete pushed Mrs Willard into the house. As they passed the Buddha statue on the dresser, Mrs Willard said: “Oh, Stan, could you hand me the envelopes there?”

Pete reached out and took the envelopes, and he noticed that the two outgoing letters to insurance companies were gone.

"Oh good," the lady said, "Li always remembers to post my letters. She went to town earlier."

"That's good," Pete said. "So where can I find the incense sticks?"

"The pack is under the altar," Mrs Willard replied. "They burn for a particularly long time, but eventually they go out. Li got them at a special shop. Please excuse my urgency just now. I'm very grateful to you!"

"It's okay." Pete nodded and climbed the stairs. The last stick had indeed just gone out. He found the packet and lit the refill. The smoke rose up his nose. "Horrible stuff," he gasped.

"Excuse me?" called Mrs Willard from downstairs.

"You can now resume contact with Eric!" Pete replied a little louder.

"Please don't make fun of me!"

"Why no, Mrs Willard."

"Oh, and bring me the puppet, please."

Pete panicked. She had to be referring to the doll he had taken earlier! It would have been a perfect opportunity to bring it back, but they hadn't intended to come back into the house. "What... puppet?"

"The water puppet. It should be at one side of the altar. I wanted to take a photo of it. Eric has it—"

"Uh..." Pete said, pushing the fruit bowl back and forth. "I don't see a puppet here."

"It can't be! It's quite a large wooden puppet. You can't miss it."

"No, nothing," Pete said and added hypocritically: "Perhaps you could ask the investigators. They are always up here. Maybe they've rearranged something. Anyway, you trust them very much, don't you?"

"Well, yes," said Mrs Willard, "but they broke one of Eric's perfume bottles and didn't tell me... but I smelled it."

Pete descended the stairs. "Sorry about the puppet," he said. "Anyway, where did the investigators go?"

"Home—to get their things. They want to work late and then spend the night here tonight. I'll probably get to bed a little later... I usually go to bed very early and get up at the first chirping of the birds."

"The early bird catches the worm," Pete tried a proverb. "By the way, what is a water puppet?"

"A play figure for a water puppet theatre," Mrs Willard said with a smile, pointing to the kitchen door. "Would you like a cup of tea? Then we'll sit on the terrace and I'll tell you about it."

Pete nodded. In the kitchen, Mrs Willard pointed to a pot and a tea set, and Pete put everything on a tray. Then he carried it outside. He sat down and Mrs Willard also rolled up to the table.

"The wooden puppet is, as I said, is for a water puppet theatre," Mrs Willard continued. "It's an old Vietnamese tradition. Eric loved them very much. When I was little, he used to tell me stories about it. Then he made his dream come true and built a theatre like this out by the pond over there..." She pointed at the small building by the pond. "He also made up his own plays—mostly about events that happened to him in life. As closed as he was to the outside world, he opened himself up with the theatre."

"How do you actually perform on a water puppet theatre?" Pete wanted to know.



"In the broadest sense, it's like a typical puppet theatre," Mrs Willard explained. "However, the shows are performed in a waist-deep pool with the water surface being the stage. The puppeteers are hidden behind a screen and control the puppets using long rods and string mechanism hidden beneath the water surface. Therefore, the puppets appear to be moving over the water as seen by the audience, who sit on the opposite side of the pool."

She took a sip of tea and Pete asked: "Did you see your uncle a lot?"

Mrs Willard shook her head. "During my marriage, I had almost completely lost contact with my uncle, but he sent me a calendar with theatre motifs for my birthday. Now that he's passed away, I feel that my heritage is much more on my mind than I thought." She poured fresh tea. "Thanks to Li, I'm learning a lot about it now."

Li here, Li there, Li everywhere—the name was almost getting on Pete's nerves. "Have you known her for long?"

"No... didn't I tell you? As soon as I got here, she came forward. Li was my uncle's spiritual advisor and now she's mine. Anyway, please tell me if you have found out anything about the animals."

"Yes, with pleasure." Pete brought the cup to his mouth and almost choked. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a person peering around the corner of the house—it was Bogus Bob!

"Is the tea too hot?" asked Alice.

"No, no, it's fine," Pete said. So the bogus investigator had stayed back, apparently to spy on them!

"We have set up our equipment," Pete said quickly, listing them all. "We haven't gone down to the stream yet, but we will do that tonight. When we find the animals, everyone will be very proud of us! Our parents, our teachers—"

"—And so will I," said Mrs Willard. "I love animals. It's nice that there are young people like you... or even like The Three Investigators who help others so selflessly and have real adventures at the same time!"

"That would be far too dangerous for us," Pete said and glanced at the corner of the house. Was Bogus Bob still there? Or had he gone to check out the summer cottage? "We're not big on criminals and scary places. It's too distracting from school."

"What school do you actually go to?"

"Cape Anna Private School," Pete said as if shot out of a gun.

"Oh, how wonderful! I knew a teacher there once. What was her name... Sue... Miller? Wasn't it?"

Pete swallowed. "Er... yes, that's right. I really don't want to keep you any longer, Mrs Willard." He stood up awkwardly. "Perhaps I can take some initial measurements down by the pond."

"You really have nothing on your minds but your research..."

"We are often told that, Mrs Willard."

"Very well. Then I don't want to hold you back, even though I always enjoy a little chat now and then."

"I'm sure we'll find another opportunity," Pete said. "Shall I bring in the cups?"

"I'll do it!"

Pete nodded goodbye to her and walked from the terrace straight to the park. After a few steps, he turned around as if by chance—Bogus Bob was no longer there!

## 10. Secret Meetings

“Do we still have contact with the tracking transmitter?” asked Bob as they left Eric Nguyen’s property in the car.

“No, not at the moment,” Jupiter said nervously.

Bob drove swiftly through the winding road, stepped on the accelerator and a short time later, he had reached the road through the mountains. Jupiter studied the receiver’s display intently, which still showed no green signal.

Bob sped towards a small van that was chugging comfortably down the road. “I don’t believe it! Why does he have to hog the road now?”

“Overtake?” asked Jupiter.

Bob braked and pulled the car slightly to the left. There were several cars coming towards them. “Too dangerous.”

Impatiently, he flashed his headlights. Finally the van pulled up close to the edge and Bob was able to overtake it.

“The signal’s back!” exclaimed Jupiter a short time later. “They can’t be far away!”

Bob did his best. He steadily stalked the other car and by the time they reached Santa Barbara, they were almost within sight of each other.

Jupiter directed his friend through the city until he suddenly said: “Slow down. They seem have reached their destination.”

They were in a neighbourhood with small single-family houses. Bob steered his Beetle into a side street. After a short while, they saw Bogus Pete strolling along the other side of the street.

“You follow him, and I’ll see where Bogus Bob and that rascal Luke are!” said Jupiter. “Before that, we have to put on yet another disguise. Change our T-shirts, and then put on a cap and sunglasses.”

While Bob took up his pursuit, Jupiter walked a little way up the street. There was no sign of the other two, but their car was parked a little way away at the side of the road. The First Investigator decided to take up position behind a van and wait. The sports bag with the investigation equipment pulled heavily on his shoulder and he placed it on the pavement. Nothing happened for quite a while.

Then a front door opened and Bogus Jupiter stepped out—alone. He looked around and hurriedly walked down the street, fortunately not in Jupiter’s direction. The First Investigator picked up the bag and crept after him.

The area became busier. Luke turned off several times as if someone was on his heels and he was trying to shake off his pursuer. Juve continued to follow as Luke strode briskly into a park, walked a little way in and sat down on a bench.

The First Investigator hesitated. From the other side, a woman approached the park bench. It was Li. She sat down with Luke.

Now Jupiter grabbed his sports bag and hurried off. He entered the park through another entrance and ran in a wide arc around the two. The bench stood by a small pond, which was lined to the back by closely overgrown tupelo trees. They provided a good visual screen.

Jupiter reached the spot and looked around. A little further on, a man was standing at the edge of the path, staring at his mobile phone. A woman was bent over her pram. No one paid any attention to him. Unnoticed, Juve made his way into the bushes. Carefully he crept forward until he found a good spot. There he unpacked his directional microphone and put the mini-phone in his ear. It took him a moment to focus the device on Li and Bogus Jupiter to eavesdrop on their conversation.

“... Do they have the riddle document?” That was Li.

Luke replied: “Those nerds? They were in the summer cottage watching whatever great animal they are after. Maybe the strange man I saw in the grounds yesterday is behind it—the one with that funny hairstyle.”

“Hmm... we have to be careful,” Li said. “I don’t like all this. What do you actually think of those three boys?”

“They are quite curious, but I have come across guys like that,” Bogus Jupiter said. “At the end of the day, they’re just little know-it-all nerds who are only keen on school work and good grades and somehow get beaten up in the school yard!”

Li laughed. “And driving is not their thing either! They nearly ended up in the pond!”

“No wonder, nerds are rarely practical!”

“Do you think they can be useful to us?” Li asked. “Do you want them to help us look? Of course we can’t tell them what it’s about, but—”

“I would prefer them to go away,” Bogus Jupiter said. “I don’t know. The ponytail guy and the glasses guy are harmless—real scaredy cats, but the fat guy with the weeds on his head, he kind of bugs me. He’s not to be trusted! Shouldn’t we stir those three up a bit instead?”

“No, I want you to focus on the search!”

“Do you actually believe that ghost story Alice is telling?”

“Come on, she’s imagining it,” Li replied, “but it plays into our hands. Enough—”

“Hey! What are you doing here?”

Jupiter flinched. A policeman pushed his way through the branches behind him.

“You there! Watering the plants is actually the city’s responsibility!” the officer said without making a face.

Just in time, Jupiter had pulled the earphone from his ear and slipped the directional microphone into the sports bag. Thinking quickly, he fumbled in his trouser pocket—out of the officer’s sight—and pulled out a coin.

“Clause 9.7—urinating in public is prohibited, on streets, pavements and all other public places,” the officer said. “I have to report this and you can make a statement.”

Jupiter squinted through the bushes. Li and Luke had risen from the bench and were walking back along the path. In a moment, they would be able to hear him and the officer!

“Er... no sir,” he stammered. “I wasn’t ‘watering the plants’!”

“Then what are you sneaking around here for?” the officer asked.

“Uh...” Jupiter stammered, letting go of the twigs, and slowly making out of the bushes towards the officer. In the meantime, he hoped that Li and Bogus Jupiter had strolled past.

“I dropped a coin and was looking for it,” Juve finally said. “Here it is...” He held the coin up to the officer.

“Well, okay,” the policeman said after short pause. “You act mighty suspicious to me. Anyway, get out of here!”

Pete had to hurry. Bogus Bob had seen him and Mrs Willard on the terrace and had since left. Not suspecting anything good, Pete took the direct path to the summer cottage.

When he reached the pond, he stopped at a boulder. From here, he could see everything. He did not have to wait long. A few moments later, Bogus Bob came running down the road. He made no effort to conceal himself. Apparently he suspected Pete was still at the house with Mrs Willard.

The Second Investigator ducked behind the boulder and watched as the other boy reached the cottage, peered through a window and then tried the door. He fiddled with the lock and shortly afterwards, he went into the house.

Pete took advantage of this moment. He ran in an arc towards the cottage. Shortly afterwards, he pressed himself along the wall. Sounds came from inside. A piece of furniture was moved.

Standing next to the living room window, Pete risked a look inside. Bogus Bob was standing on a chair and tampering with the ceiling lamp. Although he did not have his back turned to Pete, he was too concentrated on what he was doing to notice the Second Investigator. Cautiously, Pete withdrew.

What should he do? Surprise Bogus Bob and catch him red-handed? Or play the game and check what he had put on the lamp?

Pete decided on the latter. He strode to the door, no longer making any effort to be quiet. He poked around in the lock with the key. Inside, there were hectic noises.

"Bummer," Pete said as if to himself, "the wrong key!" He repeated the action, awkwardly opened the door, paced noisily through the first room, then glanced into the living room.

Bogus Bob was gone. With a soft thud, a gust of wind pushed the verandah door shut.

As there were not many pedestrians on the road, Bob kept a clear distance. Bogus Pete was suddenly in quite a hurry. Bob almost lost sight of him.

They walked towards the city centre. The area became busier. The Vietnamese boy headed for a street café and sat down at one of the outside tables. Bob stood in front of a nearby shop window and watched him out of the corner of his eye.

Shortly afterwards, a car stopped nearby. Bob rubbed his eyes—it was the yellow convertible! Elegantly, the small, agile driver jumped out. Bob did not believe it was a coincidence. This was the man they had been watching! The stranger sat down by Bogus Pete and immediately spoke to him energetically.

Somehow Bob had to get closer to the two so that he could listen in. It was time for yet another disguise! He looked around. A little way down the street, rubbish men were dumping the contents of black bins into their carts—no, not a suitable idea. Then there was a busker with a beige cape, standing at the exit of a shopping arcade, playing a guitar.

With a quick decision, Bob ran over. As he approached, he saw that it was a young woman who, under a floppy hat decorated with loud shells, was blithely looking at the people and singing old hits by the Beach Boys. Bob pulled out a ten-dollar note. It was worth it now. He bent down to her collection bag on the floor and held the note over the opening. He paused like that and blinked at the woman. "You can have it if you lend me your guitar for ten minutes... and your hat," he said.

She interrupted her singing. "Why should I do that?"

"It's a bet—whether I dare to be a busker." Bob smiled charmingly.

"How much would you win?"

"Er..." said Bob, "twenty dollars."

"Then I want the full amount. The honour is enough for you, isn't it?"

"All right," Bob had to concede. "Okay!"

"Where are your betting partners?"

"They're hiding somewhere. I don't even know where."

"Hmm... what if you take off with my guitar?"

"Just follow me. I have to go to the café and back once. That's all."

"Okay," she said. "I kind of like you—nice, especially your ponytail!"

"I'm Bob, by the way."

"Siren," the woman said and added: "That's my stage name."

Bob paid her twenty dollars. She handed him the guitar, hat and also the cape. Bob put on the clothes and put on the instrument strap. Then he strummed a few chords.

"Sounds terrible," Siren said. "What's that supposed to be? *Heart of Gold*? Maybe you'd better practise some more!" She took her money out of the bag and handed it to Bob. "Good luck!"

Bob hung the bag on his belt and started walking. As he walked along the pavement, he continued to play his song. He was familiar with songs, but had little talent playing the guitar.

Siren followed Bob at a fair distance. On reaching the café, he saw his targets with their backs to him. As Bob slowly walked towards their table, he received one or two annoyed looks. When he was close enough, he set the guitar down and pretended to look for a suitable seat. Then he rummaged in his pockets to pretend to check whether he had enough money, but in fact he listened... and smelled. There was a strange scent in the air, and Bob knew what it was...

"... If you find it, you have to hide it somewhere else!" the man just said. He spoke with an accent Bob could immediately place. He had to be French. "I know it's a lot of wood and it's not easy."

"Yes, yes," replied Bogus Pete curtly, "I will try!"

"You have to find it before the others, understand? They mustn't find out!"

"But how am I supposed to do that? I can't always be alone..."

"That's your problem! I don't have to tell you again what will happen if you don't. Then I'll tell your friend everything!"

Bob could no longer stand around without the other guests noticing.

"Did you steal the riddle document?" Bogus Pete just asked.

"What makes you think of that?"

Then Bob bumped into a chair with the guitar and the man with the funny hair turned around. Immediately, Bob turned his back on him and left.

"I'll have to change my business idea," Siren beamed when Bob returned her guitar and other stuff. "You're welcome to come by more often!"

"Uh, yeah," Bob said. "Anyway, you helped me a lot."

"You can always find me here in the afternoons," she said. "I can also teach you how to play better."

"Gladly!" Bob smiled briefly at her. Then he looked back at the café. The man just pushed Bogus Pete into the convertible and they drove off.

## 11. Sun Pho

Shortly afterwards, Bob arrived back in the street where he had parted company with Jupiter. He was standing behind a van and waved to him. He reported that Luke had disappeared into a house. Bogus Pete had also just gone in there. He must have been dropped off by the convertible somewhere nearby. Only there was still no trace of Bogus Bob.

Before Bob could tell what he had experienced, the two bogus investigators trudged out of the house. They were accompanied by a girl with a sports bag, who said a chummy goodbye to Luke, gave Bogus Pete a look and then turned off in the direction of Jupiter and Bob.

Moments later, she walked past the two boys, who had stood next to each other and were pretending to show each other something on their mobile phones. Jupe took the opportunity to snap a photo of the girl.

“Should we go after her?” asked Bob as he looked at her walking off. She had a lively walk and her sports bag bobbed in rhythm with her steps.

“Luke’s sister,” Jupiter said. “That’s how she looks to me.”

He peered to the other side. The two bogus investigators were packing their luggage into the car and sped off shortly afterwards.

“There are two of them,” Bob said. “Where’s the third?”

“Still with Alice Willard, I’m afraid,” Jupiter said. A worry line formed on his forehead. “I hope Pete is careful enough.”

After Jupiter and Bob had stocked up on food in a supermarket, they set course back to Barranco Road. After only a few hundred metres, Jupiter called out: “Stop, Bob!” He pointed outside with his hand.

‘Sun Pho’ was written on a dirty illuminated sign, under which a simple glass door led into a restaurant. It was Eric Nguyen’s restaurant.

“Maybe we can find out something about Eric,” Jupiter said. “Mrs Willard has given a hint that she wonders where he got all his money.”

“Certainly not from this joint,” Bob replied, glancing at the nondescript restaurant.

The two investigators stopped, crossed the street and entered. It was a typical fast food restaurant where one could order from numbered Asian-American dishes for either take-away or eating at one of the Formica tables.

It was not very busy now in the late afternoon. A woman and a man were bored behind the counter. They wore cardboard hats on their heads with the outline of Vietnam and a red sun printed on them. On name tags on their aprons were the names ‘Thilan’ and ‘Rafael’.

“Hello,” Jupiter said, “One-thirteen please.”

“Eating in or take-away?” the woman asked.

“Eating in,” Jupe replied.

Bob ordered a *phở* dish and the two employees got moving. The woman called Thilan started stirring a large pan of noodles and then scooped a portion of it into a bowl.

“Unfortunately, we didn’t make it back here to Sun Pho in time,” Jupiter said casually. The woman gave him a brief questioning look.

“We knew Eric,” Jupe said. “Sometimes we did things for him in his garden. Sad that he is no longer with us.”

Thilan looked at the First Investigator. “That’s really a pity, yes. I’m the manager here, and I don’t even know what to do then.”

“We heard about the terrible accident,” Jupiter said. “How did it actually happen exactly?”

The woman looked at the two boys and apparently decided to trust them. “Driving too fast, went off the road on a bend and crashed into a tree.” She sighed as if she still couldn’t believe it.

“I heard he was in Long Beach that day,” Jupiter followed up.

“Yes, he used to get something at the harbour from time to time, and he always brought flowers for our restaurant. On that night, the flowers were still in the crashed car.” She handed Jupiter the food and started on the portion for Bob.

“So the accident happened on the stretch between Long Beach and Santa Barbara?” asked Bob.

Thilan shook his head. “No, just before turning into the freeway near his house at Barranco Road. Eric must have gone back home for a moment, though it was already very late then. He was supposed to relieve me much earlier.”

“Terrible!” Jupiter took a breath. “Do you know why he didn’t come straight to the restaurant then?”

The manageress looked Jupiter in the eye. “Curious, aren’t you?” She handed Bob his food.

“Anything to drink?” the other guy interrupted them.

“No, thank you,” Jupe replied.

“Then \$16.98 please,” Rafael said.

Jupiter paid. “By the way, you are absolutely right about me being curious,” he said to the woman, “and do you know why? At the moment, his niece is staying in his house and she just won’t give anything away. Makes you want to know all the more.”

“Oh, his niece... Now all of a sudden she appears!”

“And that Li, Eric’s spiritual advisor, is hanging around there too,” Jupiter added.

“I don’t know about that,” Thilan said curtly. “Anyway, enjoy your meal!”

That was probably it for the conversation. Jupiter and Bob thanked the two employees, sat down at one of the tables and enjoyed the delicious Vietnamese food. Later on, they went back to Bob’s car and drove on.

After a few moments, Jupiter said: “What was Eric doing at the harbour? And what does ‘from time to time’ mean? Eric had a lot of money, but certainly not from his fast food restaurant. There seems to be something valuable that apparently some people are now after. Could Li be one of them? Or that man we’ve been watching?”

Bob frowned. He did not know the answer.

Finally Jupiter said: “If I summarize what we know, it could be like this—Eric creates a riddle for his niece Alice to find some items. However, she can’t solve the riddle and asks Li, who wants to get the items for herself. Perhaps she planted those bogus investigators to do the work.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” Bob said. “What about the ghost?”

“Of course, Alice Willard is only imagining the ghost. It could be easy for Li to use this imagination to steer Alice’s thoughts in a certain direction.”

“And what about the guy with the funny tuft of hair like a grebe,” asked Bob, “who swims up and down, only to suddenly reappear somewhere else entirely?”

Jupiter grinned. “‘Great Crested Grebe’ is good. You said he speaks with a French accent?”

Bob nodded. “I got the impression he was pressuring Bogus Pete to work against his friends. It could also be that the boys are smarter and play everyone off against each other in order to keep everything for themselves in the end.”

“I wouldn’t put it past Luke to come up with a plan like that,” Jupiter muttered.

“After all, there seems to be a lot at stake. The Frenchman did say: ‘it’s a lot of wood,’”

“Was that how he expressed it?”

“Yes,” Bob affirmed. “Shall we tell Mrs Willard about our suspicions?”

Jupiter shook his head. “We don’t have any evidence yet. The best thing is to watch the three imposters... and the moment they get the items, we strike. However, I’d prefer it even more—”

“—If we solve the riddle ourselves and find the hiding place before they do!” Bob added to Jupiter’s thoughts.

Jupiter smiled in agreement.

Bob turned off the main road into Barranco Road. As they approached Eric Nguyen’s house, they saw that in front of the gate, an unknown man was studying the name plate with a camera in his hand.

Bob stopped just outside the main gate. When the man saw the Beetle, he strode towards it. Bob rolled down the window.

“Are you the young biology students?” the man asked, pulling out his camera.

“No photos please!” shouted Jupiter sharply.

“Now, now, young gentlemen, you will want to get into the papers, won’t you? After all, you are making a huge discovery of some rare animals!”

“So far we haven’t found anything at all.” Jupe said. “I’m afraid your story is premature! Who informed you in the first place?”

“You know I can’t reveal my sources,” the man said. “All right. I’ll leave you alone for now. Here’s my card. Call me when you find the animals. Got it?” He waved goodbye in an exaggeratedly friendly manner and hurried to his car, which was parked a few metres away.

As he was driving away, the gate opposite slid open and Mr Baxter and his dog Dicky stepped out. “Who was that?” asked the neighbour. “Is the commotion starting already?”

Jupiter looked at the dog, who stared back in hostility. “Looks like it,” he replied. “Say, Mr Baxter, there’s quite a bit of coming and going around here. There was a small man walking around the grounds earlier, with a funny tuft of hair on the back of his head. We wanted to ask him about the platypus, but he was already gone.”

“Oh, him,” said Baxter. “He was a guest of Eric’s from time to time, maybe an old family friend. After all, he even has an access card to get pass the gate!” The neighbour took his dog by the collar and trudged towards the turning circle.

Bob rang Mrs Willard’s doorbell thoughtfully. “Surely it was Mr Baxter who tipped off the reporter,” he said.

Jupiter nodded. “It was interesting what he said about the Frenchman—that he was here before, when Eric was still alive... an old family friend indeed!”



## 12. 'Speech is Silver, but Silence is Gold'

"Oh, it's you!" Mrs Willard called through the intercom. "I'd like to give you my last access card so you wouldn't have to ring the doorbell, but I couldn't find it."

"No problem," Jupiter shouted, "we won't bother you any more today. It will soon be sunset. From now on you will find us at our observation station near the canyon."

"Good luck!"

The gate opened and Bob drove into the property. The last rays of the sun once again bathed everything in warm golden light. The bogus investigators' car was parked in front of the house. Without stopping, Bob drove past it, and a short time later, he passed the pond with the water puppet theatre and on to the summer cottage.

Pete was waiting for them in front of the cottage. Relieved, Jupiter and Bob got out. Pete put his finger to his lips and came towards them.

"Bogus Bob was here," he whispered, "and he put a bug in the living room—on the ceiling light. I've already spotted it!"

"Did you remove it?" Jupe asked.

"No, otherwise they'll just get suspicious."

"Great!" Jupiter said and grinned.

They winked at each other. Then they went into the cottage.

"So," Jupe announced extra loud, "now we have enough supplies for the next few days! Frozen pizza, Coke..." He opened the fridge and slammed it shut again.

"Such unhealthy stuff?" asked Pete. "My mum always says—"

"Your mum! Your mum! Stan, if we are looking for platypuses, we won't have time to cook!" Jupiter went into the living room, climbed on a chair and inspected the bug. Then he said: "Come outside with me, Stan! Mickey, can you read us something while we set up the equipment?" Jupiter pointed to one of the books they had packed for cover. "Read that book written by our teacher. He'll be proud of us when he finds out we've read his book!"

"Good idea," Bob said, also casting an eye over the ceiling lamp. "That way we can use the time wisely!"

While Jupiter and Pete adjourned to the verandah with the riddle document, Bob grabbed the book and sat down on the sofa. "Can you hear me outside?"

"Fine!" Jupiter yelled back.

"So," Bob began and opened the book. "*Sacred, Expensive and Dangerous Plants of Southeast Asia*. Our teacher writes: 'If you study the vegetation of Asia, you will be surprised at the great variety you will encounter. In this book, you will learn about mysterious forest stands, hear about hidden plant communities, enjoy diverse colours and shapes and...'"

While Bob read, Jupiter and Pete made themselves comfortable on the verandah and brought themselves up to date—well shielded from the bug by Bob's voice.

Jupiter then unrolled the riddle document. "The English text," he said, "are worded like a novel. We should check if it was copied from somewhere. Bob can do that later. We'll take the proverbs first." He took out his translation:

*Opportunity only comes once,  
Getting started is always hard.*

*A tree is known by its fruit,  
When eating fruits, remember the growers' efforts.*

*When the going gets tough, the tough gets going,  
Better late than never.*

*The higher you climb, the harder you fall,  
Speech is silver, but silence is gold.*

"Can you think of anything, Pete?" asked Jupiter.

"Nothing and a whole lot at the same time," said the Second Investigator. "Do you want me to think out loud? Because I can do that..."

Jupiter nodded.

"The first two sentences seem pretty clear," Pete began. "This is a once in a lifetime opportunity and to get it going is difficult. The next two sentences talk about trees and fruits, and to 'remember the growers' efforts' draws attention to the person and process that gave the tree and its fruits.

"The next paragraph is a well-known saying. So when things become difficult, people should find the means to carry on.... and it is better to continue than not. I can see that this is encouraging us not to give up, as eventually we will achieve something.

"The higher you climb, the harder you fall'," Pete continued. "So has climbing got to do with the earlier tree?"

"In the context of a person's career, falling from the heights of power is indeed hard," Jupe interjected.

"How does that fit in here?" Pete asked. "Maybe it is really related to climbing up a tree... and finally, 'speech is silver, but silence is gold'... hmm... This should be a good motto for you, Jupe!"

"Ha, ha, ha," Jupe laughed sarcastically.

"Seriously, this last sentence might be telling us what to look for—silver and gold!"

"This is going a bit fast now, Pete."

But Pete was getting more and more into the swing of things. "You can't deny the fact that the riddle mentions efforts that have to be taken to secure something—the valuable items perhaps, and it specifically states 'tree', 'fruit', and 'climbing'. Look at the little drawings on the riddle document. There are trees, fruits, and a wall of some sort. Most of the trees here grow in the small wooded area, but there is also a tree between the pond and the wall."

"From the look of it, it could be an avocado tree, and an avocado is in fact, a fruit," Jupiter reflected, "and such trees require quite picky conditions to bear fruit."

"There you go," Pete said. "If you like avocados, you have to appreciate the efforts of the growers! It all fits the riddle, Jupe!"

"If you put it that way..." Jupe began.

Pete took a breath. "Jupe! I know you usually solve everything. Why don't you give me a chance? The clues could well be pointing to the tree... and the treasure! If I do not find the treasure, perhaps I could get some fruits for ourselves."

"Well..." Jupe began but fell silent.

"I'll try it out," Pete decided. "I'll climb the tree. It would be a shame if we didn't look and the treasure left there undiscovered."

"I admit that the tree is in a very exposed place," Jupe said. "You can look there, of course, but only because of that... and only when it's dark. Why don't you relieve Bob now, he's starting to sound a bit hoarse, and then he can check on the detective story."

Pete nodded and went inside. "I'll take over the reading from you," he said. "Can you take the laptop outside to Jonathan? He wants to look up something about platypus footprints."

Bob gave Pete a grateful look, handed him the book and disappeared outside with the laptop.

Jupiter asked him to check on the English text on the Internet while he himself read through the riddle over and over again.

After a while, Jupiter had come up with no solution. However, Bob found what he was looking for. He turned the laptop around so that Jupiter could see the screen. "The English text is exactly from a crime novel! It's called *Masquerade*."

"Then I was on the right track," Jupiter stated. "We'll have to get hold of that book. Maybe it's part of the riddle!" Again he focussed on the riddle.

At some point, the sun set and a cool wind picked up. Jupiter abandoned the riddle and trudged into the house with Bob.

"Really a great introduction," Pete said aloud. "Our teacher is really something! But I need a break. Have you made any progress with the... observation?"

"Not really," Jupiter said. Suddenly it annoyed him that they still had to content with the bug. He wanted to discuss further with his friends.

"What do you actually think of The Three Investigators?" he asked, winking at Pete and Bob. He bent down to their equipment bag and unpacked a small electronic device that Pete and Bob had never seen before.

"That Jupiter seems like an arrogant guy," Bob replied with a grin. "He no respect for school work and good grades." He took a breath. "Investigators! I really can't think of a more daft activity with which to kill time. Fancy being exposed to crime and evil all the time! It's even more disgusting than sport!"

Pete added: "Mrs Willard told me that someone had stolen a puppet from the altar. Cheeky! It could only have been the three of them!"

Jupiter checked the buttons on the little box and said cunningly: "Maybe the strange man we saw on the grounds this morning is behind it. I can hardly imagine such great investigators stealing anything! Oh, Mickey, could you turn on the overhead light? It's getting too dark in here."

"Sure thing!" Bob stood up and flicked the switch.

At the same time, Jupiter switched on his device.

### 13. The Intruder

“What is that?” asked Bob, pointing to the electronic device.

Jupiter grinned. “A signal jammer. It jams the bug out. The three of them can’t hear us now.”

“Are you sure?” asked Pete.

Jupiter nodded. “Bogus Bob used a standard bug. It’s only transmitting back static now... and he should be getting trouble from his friends for putting the bug on the ceiling light of all places instead of somewhere less vulnerable!” He chuckled.

“How long have you had that thing?” Pete asked.

“Um... about two weeks or so... Uncle Titus found it in the estate of a paranoiac—that’s a person with paranoia,” Jupe explained before Pete could ask. “I’ve tested it. We’re safe!”

“Hey! Why didn’t you use this thing earlier to save me from reading those boring stuff from the book?” Bob asked.

“We can’t just block them off from the start,” Jupe reasoned. “We have to put them off by letting them think they are spying on us. Anyway, that book can’t be that boring.”

“Sure,” Pete countered. “That’s because you did not read it for us.”

“Anyway, let’s continue with our discussion,” Jupe decided.

Now they could also all share their information and thoughts together once more. Bob told Pete about the detective story in the riddle and where it came from.

“Excuse me?” exclaimed the Second Investigator. “I saw this very book in Mr Nguyen’s bedroom!”

“Then that was his copy,” Bob said. “We’ll have to get that very copy. Maybe he noted something in it or something.” Then he reported on his stakeout in the city. “I got the impression that Great Crested Grebe was putting pressure on Bogus Pete, and Jupe saw that Luke and Li had been meeting secretly. Luke seems to have a sister, by the way.”

“Does she look good?” asked Pete, more to tease Jupiter than anything.

“See for yourself,” Jupiter said and pulled out his phone.

Pete looked at the photo. In it, when the girl sauntered past, Bogus Pete could be seen in the background, looking strangely at her. “She does,” said the Second Investigator, handing the phone back to Jupiter. “Oh, I have something to report about Li, by the way. I almost forgot about that! It’s likely that she intercepted the letter to *Rocky Beach Today*! She always mails Mrs Willard’s letters for her.”

“Very good, Pete!” praised Jupiter. “So she may have planted the three bogus investigators on Alice. That makes her highly suspicious. Have you had any other conversations with Mrs Willard?”

Pete nodded. “She may have a psychic streak, but she is not naïve. She told me that she has only recently turned to old Vietnamese traditions. She had little contact with Eric for a long time but every year, he sent her a calendar featuring photos of his water puppet theatre. It’s the little building by the pond. He built it himself and he wrote the plays about events he had experienced himself.” Then Pete explained to Jupiter what he learned from Mrs Willard about a water puppet theatre.

“Aha!” Jupiter nodded thoughtfully. His gaze fell on the wall calendar hanging above the couch. He took it down and leafed through it attentively. “I’m sure this is one of those photo calendars. It does feature scenes from somewhere like an Asian theatre. The question is whether the photos tell a story and whether that could somehow also be of interest to us.”

“Can’t it wait? I want to check now whether I have solved the riddle!” said Pete. “It’s dark enough by now.”

“If that makes you feel better,” Jupiter said, but he finished leafing through the calendar and then put it aside.

They gathered their equipment and set off. From the sea, the night air spiced by the vegetation drifted up the slope. Nguyen’s house lay quietly, only a few windows were lit. The Three Investigators quickly reached the water surface and circled it.

The Three Investigators stopped and listened. Except for the light wind that brushed through the bushes and trees, nothing could be heard. Only one light was left on in the house upstairs. Probably the three bogus investigators were tearing out the roof and floor coverings in desperation by now.

“There it is,” Jupiter stated. He pointed to a dark large shadow silhouetted against the night sky between them and the property wall. “Your tree, Pete.”

Bob risked a quick swing upwards with his flashlight. Something metallic reflected the light back. Electrified, he switched the flashlight off. Was it supposed to be that simple?

Pete estimated the tree to be eight metres high. Strongly grown, it had withstood the winds from the sea. It was certainly a good place to hide something. The Second Investigator found a spot where he could start climbing.

After a few moments, Jupiter and Bob only saw something dark struggling through the branches of the tree. Every now and then they heard a groan, but they were not quite sure whether the branches were suffering from Pete’s weight or their friend was suffering from the strain.

“Do you see anything?” asked Bob.

“I can’t reach it!”

“Are you too heavy?” asked Bob.

“No, some branches are too weak.” Just then, a broken branch fell.

“Aaaargh!” The tree trembled and a few leaves fell.

“Pete?”

At that moment, a small, very bright light flared up in the distance. It seemed to come from outside the property. The beam of light fell over the wall of the property and hit the house somewhere.

“Pete, come down at once!” Jupiter ordered. “It’s no use searching up there. We have to leave!”

“I’m almost there,” Pete groaned. “Just... a little more... Damn!” The Second Investigator lost his footing and slid down. Bob tried to catch his friend, but the momentum was too strong, so Pete landed on the ground with a thud.

A pain shot through his left leg. He struggled to pull himself up and carefully felt his leg. “I don’t think it’s broken—more like sprained.” He took a few steps and screwed up his face. “It’s not that bad... I can still walk.”

“Was it at least worth it?” Bob pointed at the strange thing Pete was holding.

“It’s... a broken kite,” Pete said soberly. “It must have got caught in a tree at some point.”

“Maybe you were a little too euphoric when you tried to solve the riddle,” Juve said. “That doesn’t matter now. Come on, fellas, let’s get back to that strange light at the wall. We

have to get to the bottom of it.”

They looked over to the house. The bright light was still shining into the property.

“Not me, please,” said Pete. “Every step hurts me. I would prefer to stay here and wait for you.”

“Can you make it back to the cottage?”

“I think I can, if I go slowly.”

“Then go and attend to your leg. Bob, we’ll look over there.”

Relieved, Pete agreed. He was no longer game for a night-time chase.

They separated. With difficulty, the Second Investigator dragged himself back into the cottage. In front of the door, he turned around once more. The light on the wall had now gone out. Jupiter and Bob would know what they were doing. He couldn’t help them in this state... but maybe in another way. He grabbed the wooden puppet he had put in the tripod case on the verandah, dropped onto the sofa in the living room and put his leg on the table.

He looked at the puppet. Yes, it looked like Eric Nguyen. Was this man hiding a secret? Where did he get his money?

Pete put the puppet back into the tripod case and reached for the book he had been reading from to give Jupiter and Bob acoustic backing. He had been reading like a robot without grasping the meaning behind the lines. However, at one passage, his attention had suddenly returned. He flipped through the pages. Then he found what he was looking for. It was about a strange tree. A remark by the author about its scent had been nagging Pete—more precisely, about the scent of wood.

Scent! That was something that kept coming up several times in the past days.

“That could be...” Pete murmured, while his eyes flew faster and faster from line to line, “that could actually be it!”

With rising excitement, he flipped to the relevant chapter, read it spellbound, then put the book down satisfied. He could not wait for Jupiter and Bob to return to tell them of his discovery. In the meantime, his leg still bothered him, so he decided to take a nap before his friends return.

He turned off the lights so that he could rest in complete darkness. Although he was tired, the mystery still bothered him—the tree... the perfume... the man... Li... Mrs Willard... the three bogus investigators... the proverbs... the mysterious items... How were they all connected? Too bad he didn’t have the master mind of Jupiter Jones...

Pete didn’t know exactly how long he had been pondering over the case but eventually, he fell asleep.

Suddenly, he was woken by a noise. Someone was fiddling with the entrance door of the cottage!

It couldn’t be Jupiter and Bob as they would have made themselves heard. It sounded as if the person was poking around in the lock with a lock pick—a sound that Pete was all too familiar with. Slowly he lifted his leg from the table. The pain, which immediately increased, made him realize that he was not fit to confront the intruder.

There was a click. The intruder had succeeded. Pete heard the soft creaking of the door as it was pushed open. A cool breeze went through the rooms. Pete held his breath. The intruder entered the next room. He did not turn on any light. Only the glow of a flashlight flitted across the walls.

As if in slow motion, Pete straightened up. He tensed his muscles. It would not be long before the person found him. Pete still had the advantage. Apparently the intruder had no idea that someone was there.

The Second Investigator heard the intruder in the next room pulling open drawers and then knocking on the walls. He ventured a step forward. Then the other person suddenly stepped into the connecting door. Pete stared into the glare of the flashlight. A dark shadow loomed over the light source.

The Second Investigator could not make out who it was.

## 14. The Spirit Appears

While Pete had hobbled towards the summer cottage, Jupiter and Bob had made their way to the main house.

The light was still shining over the wall. Whatever it was illuminating, the boys could not see from their position. A little later, they reached the wall that bordered the property.

All of a sudden the strange light went out.

“Jupiter? Do you know what that was?” a woman’s voice called out. It was Mrs Willard.

Jupiter flinched, but at the same moment he realized that Mrs Willard wasn’t talking to him.

“No,” they heard Luke’s voice. “The light came from outside!”

“We already knew that,” whispered Bob. “Surely only Baxter can be behind this! His compound is secured like army barracks. You can easily shine a light in here from one of the masts.”

Now the two investigators had reached the spot on the wall where the light had shone earlier. They turned around and looked back at the main house. A room with a wide floor-to-ceiling window on the ground floor was lit up, but a smooth fabric curtain obscured their view inside. Pete had told them about it—it had to be the room where Mrs Willard stayed.

“I thought so,” said Jupiter. At that moment, he received a violent push from the side. Surprised, he lost his balance and went down. Bob tripped over him and fell to the ground as well. Two shadows detached themselves from the wall and bent over them.

“Got you at last!” a voice hissed.

Mrs Willard called out: “What’s wrong, Jupiter?”

“We got the guys behind it! There are two of them!” Luke poked Bob in the side.

“Ow,” cried Bob, “we’re not fighting back at all!” It seemed that the bogus investigators had long known who they were dealing with.

Now a lamp lit up.

“Oh no! It’s the nerds,” Luke exclaimed with feigned astonishment. “Come on, get up!”

“The three boys from the summer cottage?” Mrs Willard had obviously rolled out onto the terrace and was watching everything.

“Yeah, two of the guys!”

Jupe and Bob were pushed towards the house, where the terrace light was now on.

“You?” cried Mrs Willard. “What are you doing here? I thought you were watching the canyon!”

Jupiter tried to control himself to some extent. “We were actually doing that. In the process, we discovered the light up here and were curious to find out what was behind it.”

“You’re a bit too curious,” Luke interjected, “but being curious is our job!”

“You told us about the ghost,” Jupiter continued. “He appears when you go to sleep, probably around now. We got the idea that everything is connected with the light. It seems reasonable to assume that someone is deceiving you!”

“What do you mean by that?” cried Alice Willard. “What am I being deceived with?”

“With the ghostly apparition,” Jupiter replied, “and I have a theory about that too. There was an image of Mr Nguyen projected onto the fabric wall outside your bedroom window



with a projector.”

“Aha! That’s clearly perpetrator knowledge!” exclaimed Luke delightfully.

“No, it’s observational skills combined with sharp thinking,” Bob interjected.

“And who would do that?” intervened Mrs Willard.

“I have a theory about that too,” Jupiter said.

Luke laughed dirty. “Theory... theory... Is that how you talk? I prefer to stick to facts, and fact is that we caught you red-handed!”

Mrs Willard would not be distracted. “Jonathan, I don’t like what you are suggesting. Please tell me who did this and for what reason.”

“Those are very good questions, Mrs Willard,” Jupiter said, adding slyly, “but I’m happy to let the investigators you’ve hired take the lead. If nothing constructive comes of it, I offer to explain my own thoughts to you at your leisure.”

“Okay,” Mrs Willard agreed, and then she turned to Luke. “Please...”

“The nerds did it!” said Bogus Jupiter.

“And why?”

“Because... we caught them in the act!”

“Is there any evidence?” asked Jupiter.

“The light stopped when we spotted you guys!” continued Luke triumphantly.

“That’s better,” Jupiter said and added calmly: “It did indeed, but for a different reason. The perpetrator noticed that people were around here and switched off the light.”

“What a stupid reasoning!” cried Luke indignantly.

Mrs Willard did not respond. “Then now you, Jonathan. Who do you think is behind this?”

“Can we please discuss this with you privately?” asked Jupiter quietly. “You, Mickey, me—just the three of us?”

“You’re not going to get involved in this, I hope, Mrs Willard!” shouted Luke.

The lady looked at him. Then she looked at Juve. “Yes, I do,” she said quietly.

“I don’t believe it!” Luke snapped.

“You two investigators please go back upstairs. In a few moments, Li will come by and we want to see results! Where is Pete, by the way?”

“On the way.” Luke and Bogus Bob did not move an inch.

“Don’t you understand? I can also withdraw the assignment from you!”

“As you wish, Mrs Willard,” Luke said resignedly. He disappeared into the house with Bogus Bob, not without giving Jupiter and Bob a sceptical look.

Jupiter turned to Mrs Willard. “Please pretend you are tired and want to go to bed,” he said.

The woman looked at Jupiter questioningly, then wiped her forehead and pointed into the house.

Jupiter stepped onto the terrace and pushed Mrs Willard inside and into the bedroom. He positioned the wheelchair next to the bed and then turned off the light. “Mickey, please turn the lights on and off briefly in the hallway and then outside the front door to make it look like we’ve left.”

“Why should he do that?” asked Mrs Willard.

“With a bit of luck, we’ll see the proof of my theory in a moment,” Jupiter said. “For that, it is necessary that you pretend to go to sleep...”

“Okay,” Mrs Willard agreed. “We’ll see how this goes.”

“In the meantime,” Juve continued, “I have a few questions. Why were you on the terrace just now when that beam of light appeared?”

"I had left my book outside, saw the light and called the boys."

"I thought something like that," Jupiter said, "and then to the essentials—you are looking for some hidden items, did I understand that correctly?"

"Yes, that's what the riddle seems to imply," Mrs Willard said.

"We got to see the document... briefly," Jupe said. "It didn't specifically say what items they were."

"Well, it's like this," Mrs Willard began. "Eric's death was sudden and he did not leave a will. I am the only surviving member of his family so I inherited his estate. However, there were documents lying among other things on his desk upstairs and Li found them. In particular, there was a letter with the riddle document. It seems that Eric hid some valuable items somewhere here in this property and the riddle gives the location. Actually, I don't even know what that valuable item is. Li and the boys suggested that it might be silver or gold. Perhaps it was illegally obtained—hopefully not. Anyway, he thought I could solve the riddle."

Jupiter nodded. At least now, he had a better picture of the situation.

Bob came back from outside and Mrs Willard continued: "Anyway, I didn't get anywhere with the riddle. Li knew two boys who had worked as investigators before. She suggested I ask them both for help." She paused and smiled.

"However, you told us that your friend recommended The Three Investigators to you because of a newspaper article," Bob joined in the conversation.

"Exactly," said Mrs Willard, "and then they came—the three boys, and they started looking and trying to solve the riddle." She coughed. "I want—"

"Look out!" hissed Bob. A light had flashed up outside. The reflection formed on the smooth fabric curtain.

Involuntarily, Mrs Willard grabbed Bob's forearm. "There he is," she whispered. "Eric!"

The three stared spellbound at the spectacle before them. The image of a man could be seen in indistinct surroundings. He took a few steps towards the observers and threatened them with his fist. Suddenly, the image disappeared and it was dark again.

Only in Jupiter's hand was something glowing. It was the display of his mobile phone, which he had switched on. "Is the appearance always this short?" he asked.

"Sometimes longer—but the appearance seems to be always the same."

Jupiter stared at the video he had just recorded. "A video ghost," he said. "There are tall posts with cameras on the property opposite and—"

"You're talking about Mr Baxter?" exclaimed Mrs Willard. "You think he's behind this?"

"I'm almost certain," Jupiter said, holding out the display to Mrs Willard. "When your uncle was alive, Mr Baxter routinely recorded him with his surveillance cameras. Now he has edited the footage together for his own purpose. See here." He pulled a still frame of the video larger. "Very blurry, but if you look carefully at the very bottom of the video, you could see something like the ears of a dog. I'm sure that's Dicky barking at Eric and he was threatening his fist at the dog. Eric's gesture isn't for you, Mrs Willard!"

"But why would Mr Baxter do that?"

Jupiter answered with a counter question: "Was he interested in this property?"

"Yes. How do you know? It always bothered him that my uncle got the best location in the street—the one with the view of the sea. Eric once mentioned it to me."

"And now he is trying to drive you away so that you don't even get the idea of staying here. He probably wants you to sell him the property for as little money as possible."

“That explains a lot,” Mrs Willard said slowly. “Baxter has told me one horror story after another, including power cuts, break-ins and bad neighbours. Well, I’ll give him a piece of my mind!”

“There are no ghosts anyway!” Jupiter said.

“Spirits, Jonathan. Baxter’s projections may be tricks, but our dead relatives are really with us—not only in the evenings.”

“I won’t deny that,” the First Investigator said, but did not want to discuss it further. He went to the door to switch the light back on.

“By the way, I also suspect Mr Baxter of having called a reporter about the platypuses,” Jupe added. “The reporter was roaming around outside your house and we sent him away. Mr Baxter obviously speculates that the more unrest there is here, the more uncomfortable you will feel.”

“—Which he is wrong about,” said Mrs Willard. “I would be very happy about the animals. Hopefully, you are successful in finding them.”

Bob did not respond immediately. He looked at Jupiter briefly before saying to Mrs Willard: “Maybe it’s time we confessed something to you.”

“Yes, I think so too,” Jupe agreed. “Mrs Willard, I hope you believe us and don’t hold it against us. It was done in good intentions. Unfortunately, we have to confess a certain fact to you. We are not biology students and we are not looking for platypuses.”

Mrs Willard laughed. “I know! You are The Three Investigators!”

## 15. Fight in the Dark

Pete stared at the person whose outline was visible in the doorway to the small kitchen. “Who are you?” he asked boldly. “And what are you doing here?”

“None of your business!”

Pete recognized the voice. It was Bogus Pete, the Vietnamese boy. With a quick movement, he now placed the large flashlight on the floor and took up his fighting stance.

“Please,” said the Second Investigator, “can’t we talk to each other?”

But by then Bogus Pete had already jumped in.

The real Pete was also a skilled fighter, but he had a handicap—his injured leg! He let his opponent get close, highly concentrated. Then came the blow. Pete had expected it and with a precisely placed dodging movement, he let the punch slide into nothing. A second blow followed immediately, where Pete was able to avoid again. Then a foot hit him painfully in the stomach area. No doubt, this guy knew his business. Pete blocked another blow, which caused his opponent to stumble.

The Second Investigator seized the moment and went on the offensive. With his healthy foot, he landed a direct hit on his opponent’s hip, but the injured leg could not withstand the pressure and Pete lost his balance. Bogus Pete was already back. Pete managed to clasp him, but only briefly, because with a spinning throw, the other lifted him onto the coffee table, which collapsed with a crash.

Something rolled towards Pete. It was the tripod case containing the puppet—the wooden Mr Nguyen. He held the case in front of him like a weapon. His opponent suddenly picked up his flashlight. Slowly they walked towards each other.

Bogus Pete struck at Pete’s ‘weapon’. Pete felt that the blow caught the head of the puppet and it broke off, flew out of the case, and rolled to below the window. Then he feinted a punch to the stomach area and took advantage of his opponent’s defensive reaction to clasp him. Wedged together, they slid to the floor. Neither of them could move even a little.

Pete’s injured leg hurt a lot. All the energy drained out of him like a wave running out in the sand. “It’s a draw,” he panted. “Okay?”

“You really are a tough one!” Bogus Pete groaned with difficulty. He loosened his grip.

“Thank you. I try to be one!” Pete quipped.

They let go of each other and leaned against the wall, breathing heavily.

“Why did you throw yourself at me?” asked Pete.

“I wasn’t expecting you. Attack is the best form of defence!” Bogus Pete said. “In fact, I have nothing against you at all, but Jupiter told us to get you out of here.”

“Do you always do what he tells you to do?”

“He’s our leader. What about you? You’ve got one who always knows where things are going, don’t you?”

“Sometimes I do disagree with... uh... Jonathan.” Pete laughed. Then they fell silent.

“Jupiter thinks you’re annoying nerds,” Bogus Pete finally said, but he smiled as he said it. “In Vietnamese, we have a saying: *Có học phải có hành*—Education is useless without practice.”

“Maybe we are not always interested in the things that people normally like such as sports, girls and video games... but we are nowhere near as bad as it looks!”

“Actually, I think you’re okay,” Bogus Pete admitted.

Pete thought he had misheard. “Why?”

“You apologized to me.”

“When?”

“The first time we met and you stared at me just because I looked Asian.”

“That wasn’t the reason I looked at you like that.”

“Yes, you told me that.” He was silent for a moment. “Why were you sitting here in the dark? Was this a trap?”

Pete shook his head. “I had to think...”

“About the platypuses?”

“No, about you... and Li... and the man with the funny haircut.”

There was a pause. “You are not biology students, are you?” the Vietnamese boy asked cautiously.

“Well...” Pete began and then hesitated. Should he come out of hiding a little? Maybe Bogus Pete would then also tell more. The Second Investigator also realized that he did not dislike his imposter.

“Well, the three of us have been so engrossed in our school work,” Pete said calmly, “and I never really knew that young people could engage in such interesting activities until I learned what the three of you do.”

“What? Like investigation work? ... Really?”

“Yes...” Pete continued. “In fact, I am not that interested in school work unlike my two friends Jonathan and Mickey. Life must be very exciting for you...”

“Sure, of course,” said Bogus Pete quickly. “After all, we are The Three Investigators. Do you want to see our card?”

“Love to.”

Bogus Pete stood up and switched on the lights. Then he rummaged in his trousers and gave Pete a small card. It said:



“Nice,” Pete said. “Who wrote the slogan?”

“Jupiter,” said the boy. “He is very proud of it. So tell me, why are you here? It’s not just for the animals, is it?”

“Well... the neighbour, Mr Baxter, told us about these ghostly apparitions,” Pete tried an approach of truth. “To me, that sounds kind of exciting.” That of course, was a lie.

“Shouldn’t we work together? I mean, all of us?”

“What are you thinking of?” Bogus Pete asked.

“Say, solving the riddle, for example,” Pete said, “because we could be very good at such things.”

“The riddle!” Bogus Pete laughed. “Did you steal the document from us?”

“Yes,” admitted the Second Investigator.

“Well, have fun with it! You must have racked your brains over it.”

“A little bit,” Pete said cautiously. “Why?”

“Because the whole thing is nonsense!”

Pete had to swallow. “What? Nonsense? You mean the riddle is not real?”

“No,” Bogus Pete said. “The Vietnamese texts are just a list of proverbs. The individual statements are very meaningful, but when put together they do not mean anything!”

The Second Investigator was silent, but his head was rattling. Then his so imaginative attempt at solving the riddle had been completely in vain?

“So if they were not clues to a hiding place...” Pete said, “what was that for?”

“The whole write-up was created to get Mrs Willard to hire us as investigators,” Bogus Pete explained. “*Muốn ăn cá cả phải thả câu dài*—If you want to eat the big fish, you have to cast a long line! That means that if you want to achieve something, you have to put in the effort.”

“So for the English text, you just copied from the book that is in Eric’s bedroom? Just to put in some story?”

Bogus Pete looked at Pete. “Exactly!” he said. “How did you figure that out? Actually, Li owns the book, but we left it there. In case of need, it looks like Eric copied a passage from the novel to use as a clue.”

“And who put in the drawings?” Pete asked further. “Jupiter?”

“Bob,” said Bogus Pete. “He likes to draw, and the proverbs are from me—as you can imagine.” The boy took a breath and scrambled to his feet again. “But now I should keep searching. Together or alone, it doesn’t matter!”

Pete thought of what he had just read in the book about the trees. “Are you really looking for silver or gold?”

“No,” said Bogus Pete, “but I can’t tell you what it is.”

“You don’t need to. You’re looking for something from a tree—a lot of wood!”

The boy winced briefly. “What makes you think of that?”

Pete didn’t want to tell that Bob had overheard the conversation with Great Crested Grebe in the café, but now it was clear to him that he was on the right track. “Earlier I was reading from a book about something very special, among other things—valuable wood from one of the rarest trees in the world...” The Second Investigator said. “Agarwood!”

Bogus Pete looked at Pete. “Why do you think... Okay, okay, it’s true! It’s a rare wood from a tree that grows in Southeast Asia.” He thought for a moment. “Stan, please do me a favour. Help me or keep quiet... because I have a problem.”

Pete guessed what the boy was trying to tell him—the man with the convertible had put pressure on him. That’s what Bob had learned. Pete ventured a shot in the dark. “I know,” he said. “The guy with the funny haircut.”

“Hey!” shouted Bogus Pete. “What do you know about that guy?”

“That he’s French, for example.”

“Close. He’s Belgian!”

“Whatever. He’s got something on you, hasn’t he? We just happened to see you two in town!”

“You are really interested in this, aren’t you, Stan?” Bogus Pete asked. “You just said something about working together. All right. Earlier, I found a note in Mr Nguyen’s office. It says there’s a hiding place somewhere on his property. Before you came, the three of us searched the whole of this cottage and found nothing. Still, the agarwood must be

somewhere! Then we went to search the house. Where is it? Where is the hiding place? I have to find it and I don't have forever!"

"Why are you here alone?"

"Why, why, why..." Gruffly, the Vietnamese boy ran into the next room.

Pete struggled to his feet. His gaze fell on the wooden puppet's head, which lay severed from its body on the floor below the window. The puppet seemed to stare at him reproachfully.

The Second Investigator limped over and picked it up. It was hollow inside. Hollow? Was there anything inside? No. But maybe something had fallen out as it flew across the room!

Pete searched the floor. Sure enough! There was a small key lying next to a cloth which was probably used to wrap the key! Pete briefly thought about whether he should hide it and later figure out what it was for.

However, the Vietnamese boy re-appeared in the doorway and had seen everything. "What is that?"

"A key."

"I can see that... and is that the puppet head you are holding. Was the key inside it?"

Pete nodded.

"Then you did steal 'Mr Nguyen'! Mrs Willard suspected us, and I suspected the Belgian."

"A key in the puppet," Pete said thoughtfully. "That must be the solution! We'll find the hiding place together. Then we'll see."

"But where is the lock that the key fits into?" Bogus Pete asked.

"It still could be anywhere," Pete said, "but since we are here, we might as well look for a keyhole that fits." He limped into the front room and looked around. None of the kitchen drawers had a lock. His gaze fell on the plastic sign saying 'Blinds', which was fixed next to the main door.

"Of course!" Pete remarked. Jupe had mentioned in passing that the switch for the blinds was key-operated, and under the sign was a keyhole.

Pete proceeded to insert the key. It fit! And he turned it. Directly underneath Bogus Pete, something clicked in the floor.

"Wow!" Bogus Pete said with relief and took a step to the side. At the same moment, three wooden boards bounced up and revealed a trapdoor leading down.

They had found the hiding place!

## 16. The Hiding Place

“Yes, I know you are The Three Investigators,” Alice Willard repeated. “That’s right, isn’t it?”

“We were just about to confess that to you,” Jupiter said.

Bob added: “How did you know?”

“I’ve had a strange feeling because the story about the platypus... seemed ridiculous,” Mrs Willard explained. “Then this afternoon I spoke to my friend from the hardware store on the phone. She told me that Bob from The Three Investigators had been to her hardware store and bought a metal detector. At about the same time, another boy had turned up who wanted to return something\ to this very Bob—a fingerprint powder set. She wanted to know if he did come here.

“Instead of one boy, you three biology students had shown up at my place. That got me thinking... I decided to e-mail a still photo of you three captured by the entrance security camera to the police in Rocky Beach. An Inspector Cotta replied. Meaningfully, he said: ‘They may be dressed up a little ridiculous—not to my surprise—but they are clearly The Three Investigators of Rocky Beach. I know them very well, in fact, too well!’”

“You are really good—” Jupiter began.

“—Better than you thought, right?” Mrs Willard interjected. “Why didn’t you make it clear who you were and ‘infiltrate’ here instead?”

“We wanted to know why those three boys we had never seen before are pretending to be us—as The Three Investigators,” said Jupiter. “To do so, we had to come here, assume false identities, and put on a disguise. But more importantly, we now want to help you. You fell into the trap of those three impostors, Mrs Willard. It seems to me that Li is up to something as well. She’s probably after the hidden items herself. Why else would she plant the bogus investigators on you?”

“Li did that? And how would she have done that?”

“The letter,” Jupiter said. “Li intercepted it and had her three boys call you instead of us.”

Bob nodded. “When Mr Baxter started his ghost show, she just fitted it into her story.”

“That’s incredible,” said Mrs Willard. “Li will be here in a minute. I’m going to confront her right away!”

Jupiter raised both hands. “May I ask you to wait a little longer?”

“Why?”

“We would like to uncover the plot, especially since there is also a man prowling around your property from time to time.”

“Excuse me?”

“I suppose you didn’t know about his existence yet,” Jupe said. “May we investigate for you? Then I think it is possible that we may be able to present to you what is going on here tonight. After all, we are the real Three Investigators!”

Jupiter pulled out a business card and handed it to Mrs Willard. It said:





“All right,” said the lady. “You are hired, and tonight I’ll play along with you according to your instructions.”

At that moment, the doorbell rang. Someone came hurriedly down the stairs. Mrs Willard rolled into the hallway, Jupiter and Bob followed. It was Bogus Bob who just opened the door.

Li was standing outside. The visibly excited boy gave the three behind him an irritated look. Then he turned back to the front and whispered softly to Li: “Uh... Jupiter has disappeared! Pete too!”

It was not quiet enough. Jupiter, Bob and their new client had heard everything.

Li gave Mrs Willard a friendly wave and pulled Bogus Bob outside. “We have to check something, Alice,” she called. “Don’t worry, we’ll be right back!”

“What are you going to do?” asked Mrs Willard when the two had left.

“Bob and I will go after them,” Jupiter said. “Then we’ll find out what they are up to.”

The trapdoor in the floor was opened. Curious, Pete stepped next to Bogus Pete, who stared into the depths in surprise. A faint light dawned on them. Apparently it had switched on automatically when it opened.

Bogus Pete swung himself onto the ladder and climbed down. The Second Investigator followed. Under the summer cottage was a cellar perhaps three by four metres. In one corner, a large pile of loosely thrown firewood was piled up. Next to it was an empty laundry basket. There was nothing else down here except a musty smell.

Bogus Pete took a log, smelled it and threw it back on the pile, disappointed.

“Isn’t that agarwood?” asked Pete.

Bogus Pete shook his head. “Stinky normal logs, I’d say. The kind you use for a fireplace.”

“Mr Baxter used to sell Mr Nguyen firewood from time to time,” Pete recalled. He too grabbed a piece and smelled it. “Still, there’s a sweet smell in the room!”

The two Petes looked at each other and began to take log after log from the pile until the Second Investigator finally held a piece in his hands that looked different, blacker, and above all... smelled.

“Ingenious!” Pete exclaimed. “Mr Nguyen just mixed the agarwood with normal firewood!”

“If he had made a mistake in using this as firewood, he would have burned a lot of money,” said Bogus Pete. “After all, the resin from a piece of wood like that can be worth a hundred thousand dollars. Only under very special circumstances does a mould develop in the wood that produces this resin. This takes years.”

Something cracked upstairs. Hopefully it was just the warped wooden floorboards.

“Come now,” said Bogus Pete quickly. “Let’s put it in the basket so Li can’t get her hands on it.”

“Li? But she commissioned you to find this!”

“Yes, actually.”

Again something creaked. Bogus Pete put the wood in the laundry basket and they searched for more pieces.

They found five in total—five heavy, resin-soaked blocks. The boys weighed them in their hands, smelled them and stacked them in the laundry basket.

“I’ll carry them up,” Bogus Pete said and lifted the basket.

“Oh no!” Pete objected. “Then you’ll shut the trapdoor and lock me down here!”

“Come on, Stan! I told you about a hiding place here!”

The Second Investigator shook his head. “But I gave you the key, so I’ll take the basket!”

“Look! You hurt your leg, right?” Bogus Pete argued. “How are you going to carry this up the stairs. Look, I promise I won’t lock you up if you let me take the basket!”

“I don’t know—” Pete began.

“We’ll work together, okay?” Bogus Pete lifted the basket over his head and nimbly climbed the ladder.

Pete followed close behind him. With momentum, the Vietnamese boy pushed the basket through the opening onto the floor of the kitchen and then wanted to pull himself out of the cellar. However, he did not get the chance.

A violent blow made him lose his balance and fall down—towards Pete, who somehow found the situation familiar.

At the same time as the two boys landed roughly, the flap was pushed shut at the top.

Then the light went out.

While Pete rubbed his aching arm, the bogus investigator climbed the ladder again and pushed as hard as he could against the trapdoor—but it remained locked.

## 17. Minh's Secret

"Where are they?" Bob grabbed Jupiter by the arm. The beam of light from Li, who had quickly moved away from the front door with Bogus Bob, was suddenly not visible.

"We'll walk towards the pond," Jupiter decided, "and then past the water puppet theatre. If anyone wants to meet secretly, it might be at a prominent place like that."

It took a while before they could make out the pond with the wooden building. The wind had died down and the stars were reflected in the smooth black surface of the water. A little way away was the tree where Pete had unsuccessfully searched for the hidden items.

"There is someone there!" whispered Jupiter. "Back there by the tree. I hope he doesn't notice us." He involuntarily walked a little faster.

Bob narrowed his eyes. "I don't see anyone."

Shortly afterwards, they reached the pond and walked around it towards a boulder that rose from the grass a few metres from the water. From this spot, they had a good view of both the tree and the puppet theatre.

Jupe and Bob were about to hide behind the boulder when the First Investigator bumped into something with his foot. It rumbled softly.

"Some kind of laundry basket!" Jupiter felt the contents and muttered in amazement: "There's firewood in it. Someone must have put it here!"

He was about to turn away again when Bob asked: "Is that the smell of firewood? Someone must have poured perfume on it!"

With heavy steps, Bogus Pete came back down the ladder.

"Did you see who it was upstairs?" asked the Second Investigator.

"No."

Pete dug out his phone. Fortunately, it had survived the fall. He turned on the light and checked the connection but down here in the cellar, there was no reception. "Bummer! Now we have to wait for Jupe to come and get us out of here," he said.

"Jupe?" asked Bogus Pete. "Who's Jupe?"

"Er..." Pete said and blushed. Goodness, he had blabbed! "I mean, Jupiter"

"He won't come," replied Bogus Pete. "He's tearing Mrs Willard's house apart right now. Your two friends are more likely to show up!"

"Could be," Pete said.

The boy stared at him. "Tell me," he said slowly, "that was a slip of the tongue, wasn't it? Why would you of all people call Jupiter 'Jupe' and hope that he would get us out of here?"

"Because..." Pete couldn't think of anything plausible at the drop of a hat.

"There are three of you," Bogus Pete reflected, "and you're just pretending to be nerds. You said something being interested in investigation work... Oh yes, now I really have a reason to be suspicious of you!"

"Er..." Pete went on.

"You are The Three Investigators, aren't you?"

With a contrite expression, Pete nodded. “Bummer,” he said. “I should have told you earlier, but we didn’t quite trust each other then...”

Bogus Pete looked at him. “This is a complete mess,” he muttered. “Total bust! So you were on our trail!”

“What is your real name?” asked Pete.

“Minh. Man, what a bummer!”

“And the others?”

“Luke is ‘Jupiter’ and Mark is ‘Bob’... and which of the three are you?”

“Pete,” Pete said and smiled. “We are both the Petes. I can still be quite happy with you playing me. Jupiter had a harder time with Luke!”

“It might sound strange, but I feel pretty set up right now.”

“Well, we felt the same way,” Pete said. “Where did you get your information about us?”

“Li told us a little bit,” Minh explained. “Actually she didn’t know much about you guys. Li had convinced Mrs Willard that she needed someone to find Mr Nguyen’s supposedly hidden items. She thought of us first as she knew me, and she wanted me to bring Luke. However, some friend of Mrs Willard’s had heard about you chaps from Rocky Beach and came along with a newspaper article. So Mrs Willard really wanted you and wrote to the newspaper! Li was able to intercept the letter and we got Mark in and pretended to be you three.” He looked at Pete. “How did you find out about it?”

“Sheer coincidence,” Pete explained. “Bob—the real Bob—was at the hardware store at the same time as Mark and overheard him talking to the sales assistant.”

“Oh man, how stupid! Tsk, tsk, tsk.” Minh shook his head. “Now what?”

“Now we wait for Jupiter—the real one.”

“By then, the wood would be long gone.”

“Up there, could that have been Li?” Pete asked. “—Or one of your friends?”

Immediately Minh made a dismissive hand gesture. “Not Luke, not Mark. We’re a gang.”

“—That you yourself wanted to betray... even if under pressure,” Pete commented, “and now you are afraid that you will lose your friends?”

“Yes,” he said. “Luke is a conceited idiot sometimes, but he stands by me one hundred percent, even though he’s from here—I mean, a local. You know, it’s not so easy for me to live here! In Vietnam, I’m the American and here I’m always the Vietnamese! You’re Pete from Rocky Beach—maybe the sporty one or the brave one or whatever, but I’m always the Asian guy first. I never quite belong.”

Pete nodded. “I see, but I’m sure you know a lot I don’t know about.”

“Like what?”

“Hmm... something about ghosts, perhaps? Mrs Willard was talking about her uncle’s ghost like it was alive. I’m kind of scared of it.”

“You don’t need to,” Minh said. “In our culture, the spirits of the deceased continue to accompany us. They try to advise us and protect us. They are not evil.”

“—But Jupiter always says there are no ghosts.”

“I would refer to them as spirits,” Minh said. “If we believe in it, it exists. For us, they influence what we do—and that is real. We receive guidance through intuition, inspiration, and synchronicity.”

“Jupiter would say it’s all a trick you play on yourself.”

“If he puts it that way, why not? If the trick does good...”

“Hmm...” Pete murmured.

“From what you said,” Minh continued. “I would presume that Jupiter is one that only believes in science, right?”

“Exactly,” Pete replied. “He only accepts knowledge and evidences based on science, and he ridicules those that don’t.”

“Yup, I know people like that as well,” Minh said. “Frankly, you know that science cannot explain all phenomena. It is evolving and depends on a specific process for acquiring knowledge. In fact, both science and spirituality search for knowledge. The difference is that science searches for external experiences, while spirituality is knowledge of the spirit or inner experience.

“Spirituality gives me meaning, direction and purpose. It helps me to grow as a person. It gives me tools to overcome the worst in myself, to develop myself, and to explore the aspects of our existence.

“So for me, one needs a balance between science and spirituality. However, if you are more inclined with one, it is not appropriate to denigrate the other, but to bring clarity as to the similarities and differences, so you can live in the most empowering way possible for you.”

“Hmm...” Pete murmured. “Very well said...”

“Well, whatever it is now, we’re both in this hole together,” Minh said.

“Surely you have an appropriate proverb for this situation?”

“Sure,” Minh replied. “*Bầu ơi thương lấy bí cùng, tuy rằng khác giống nhưng chung một giàn.*”

“Okay, let me guess—does that mean that with wisdom and patience you can always find a solution?” Pete wondered.

Minh shook his head and smiled. “As different as we are, when we face difficult situations, we help each other and work together to overcome the consequences.”

“Well, we sure could do that to get out of this trap.” Pete groaned because his leg hurt. “—But I don’t think I can do much with my injured leg.”

“The trapdoor is pretty solid,” Minh admitted. “We can wait until we hear someone outside, then we’ll knock on the trapdoor to make some noise.”

“If we’re going to wait here, we might as well talk,” Pete said. “I have another question—so Li wants to get the wood, but so does the Belgian. Why?”

Minh cradled his head. “I suppose he works for the perfume industry. Expensive fragrances are made from the rare resin.”

Pete had to think of the bottles in Mr Nguyen’s bedroom. He had probably smuggled the wood secretly with his connections in Vietnam and sold it on to the Belgian, who had repaid him not only with a lot of money, but also with one or two bottles of perfume. The last time, however, Eric Nguyen’s fatal accident had disrupted the delivery of the wood.

“And what is the Belgian pressuring you with?”

“If I don’t find the wood for him, then he will... uh... no, I can’t tell you!”

“Why not?”

“This is embarrassing.”

Pete groaned. “It doesn’t work like that. How am I supposed to believe you then? Did you steal something?”

Minh shook his head.

“Someone... will get hurt or... worse?”

“No! Nothing like that. Please stop,” said Minh.

“Are you here illegally?”

“No, no, it’s complicated...”

“Hmm...” Pete looked at Minh as best as he could in the darkness. The boy squirmed.

“A girl,” Pete said, thinking of the photo Jupe had taken outside Luke’s house—the girl Minh was looking at. “That’s it, isn’t it?”

“Stop it!”

“So yeah. Maybe... Luke’s sister?”

“Idiot!” Minh turned away.

Pete was silent.

“Yes, yes,” Minh finally groaned. “Sarah and I are together. The Belgian knew. He happened to see and overheard us!”

Pete remembered how the Belgian with his yellow convertible had suddenly disappeared from the scene when they wanted to pursue him. That chap seemed to be able to come and go inconspicuously.

“What did he overhear?” asked Pete.

“He heard us talking about Luke because there’s no way Luke can know about her and me. That would be a disaster!”

“—Because he doesn’t think you’re right for his gorgeous sister?”

Minh took a breath. “Anyway, I can forget all that now! The wood is gone!”

“How did the Belgian get onto the property here so easily?”

“First he had to climb, but then I got an access card for him.”

Pete knew that Mrs Willard couldn’t find one of these cards. Now the Second Investigator knew all he wanted to know. He drew the dry cellar air through his nose. It was about time Jupiter or Bob came.

Pete and Minh decided not to wait, so they took turns to bang on the trapdoor.

## 18. The Masks Fall

“What’s that strange noise?” asked Bob quietly. A dull but strong knock came from the summer cottage. “Pete. That must be Pete! I’ll go and check.”

“Okay, Bob,” Jupiter whispered. Still holding one piece of the strange wood, he smelled it. “I’ll hold the fort here.”

Jupiter watched Bob disappear into the night. Then he looked at the piece of wood again. Why was this laundry basket suddenly standing here? The remark from Great Crested Grebe, which Bob had overheard, ran through his mind—‘... it’s a lot of wood’. Wasn’t that meant as a figure of speech?

Jupiter’s gaze fell on the pond. The calendar photos of the water puppet theatre had told a story. Mr Nguyen had been in it, other men in boats and always a strange object that, with a little imagination, could well be a piece of wood. Was it perhaps about smuggling? But why wood? And how did the wood get here so suddenly?

Carefully, Jupiter put the piece of wood back with the others, lifted the basket and walked cautiously towards a bench about fifty paces away on the path that led around the pond. There he pushed the basket behind a bush until it was no longer visible.

Quiet voices came from the direction where the single tree stood. Jupiter scurried back to the boulder, the original place where the wood had been found. However, he kept a little distance away, crouched in a hollow in the ground.

Someone approached from the direction of the tree. It was two people. In the weak light of the moon, he could make out their outlines well. The first was... Great Crested Grebe! And right behind him was Luke!

“Here it is,” Luke said when they were close to the boulder.

Great Crested Grebe stopped and shone a flashlight over the ground. “But there’s nothing here!” he said.

Jupiter grinned to himself and thought to himself: “He can look for a long time...”

Hectically, Luke jumped around the boulder and shone a light on everything. “It can’t be!” he said far too loudly. “I’m sure of it! It’s exactly the place where I put it!”

Great Crested Grebe now also dropped all caution. “But there’s nothing here!” he shouted again. “You’re trying to trick me, you rascal! Our deal is off!”

Suddenly the beam of another flashlight shone to the side. “Are you threatening the boy, Stéphane?”

The man and Luke turned around. “What are you doing?” Great Crested Grebe cried. “Is that you, Li? Isn’t your name Li?”

“Yes. I’ve been watching you and your activities for a long time!” Li and Mark appeared.

Suddenly something cracked behind Jupiter in the darkness.

“Is someone there?” Li called out suspiciously.

Jupiter pressed himself deeper into the hollow. At that moment, someone tripped over him. A soft curse was heard. Immediately Li turned the light in Jupiter’s direction.

Jupe recognized Bob, who was just getting back up. Pete was standing behind him.

“Jupe? You?” Pete cried.

“Yes, Pete!” As glad as Jupiter was that they were both all right, the moment of their appearance was inappropriate. He too stood up.

“You?” exclaimed Li. “What a surprise!”

“Bogus Pete and I were trapped in a secret cellar in the summer cottage,” Pete whispered quickly to Jupiter. “We were not able to break the trapdoor! Bob then freed us.”

Luke pointed at the three of them. “I bet they have it! Sure! Fatso is behind it. They’ve got the basket!”

Minh also arrived now and joined Li and Mark.

“Is that right? Do you have what I’m looking for?” the Belgian shouted.

“I would be happy to answer that question for you,” Jupiter said, “but first I would like to ensure transparency by necessity, because hardly anyone here is who they say they are, including the three of us...” He paused to give the following sentence more impact. “We are not biology students or platypus hunters. We are the real Three Investigators!”

Li gasped, while Mark was silent as he had obviously got this information from Minh.

The First Investigator continued: “We had to take note that someone was acting under our name and wanted to find out why. As expected, the bogus investigators turned out to be extremely stale reflections of the real ones.”

“Shut up, fatso!” Luke shouted between them. “What do you know about anything? All you do is read bio books to each other from morning till night!”

“I can explain everything,” Pete intervened, “the whole case!”

“That’s what I am going to do now—” Jupiter said in amazement.

“I found the wood,” Pete interrupted him, “together with Minh!”

“You?” cried Jupiter. “I found it! Just now!”

“Really? The wood is back? We found it earlier in the secret cellar in the summer cottage, but then someone took it. I... we... oh, never mind!” Pete waved it away.

Jupiter looked at him, slightly irritated. “Maybe we’ll come back to that later, Pete...”

“I’d like to get back to the basket of wood!” the Belgian said threateningly.

Jupiter took a breath. “In a moment. Perhaps it is also interesting for you to know what I have deduced. I knew something is of value here! I asked myself the following questions—how did Eric Nguyen get all his money? Probably through something he wanted to keep hidden. Why did he go to Long Beach, the port with ships from all over the world? And then a few days ago, why did Eric Nguyen come home first when he was already late for work? Maybe to do something important or to deposit something.” Jupiter took a breath. “And then the calendar—what do the pictures tell? Well, with a little imagination, a kind of smuggler’s story! Only it’s not made up, as one would assume, but real! But what was he smuggling? This somehow seems to be about scented wood...” Jupe cast a questioning glance at Pete.

“Agarwood!” said the Second Investigator proudly. “That’s what they call it! It is used to produce some of the most expensive perfumes in the world! It probably came to Long Beach illegally by ship from Vietnam. There Eric picked it up personally to resell it to a dealer who serves the perfume industry—namely you, Mr...” He pointed at the Belgian.

“Stéphane Mertens,” Li said coldly. “That must be you, surely?”

“*Oh zut!*” the man snapped.

Before Li could say anything in reply, Pete said: “The last delivery went wrong. Eric did take the agarwood to his secret hiding place but then he sped off to his restaurant and along the way, he met an accident and died. So you didn’t get the delivery, Mr Mertens! And you didn’t know where the wood was hidden.”

“Very good!” Jupiter nodded at Pete. “That leaves the part of Li who was engaged with her ‘investigators’ upstairs in the house.” He looked at the black-haired woman. “You work



at the Vietnamese consulate, don't you?"

"Wow!" Bob exclaimed. Li stared dumbly at Jupiter.

The First Investigator was not deterred. "I assume you have been on the smugglers' trail for some time. Since you probably didn't trust the local authorities, you took the investigation into your own hands."

"That's right," Li now broke her silence. "I want to expose the whole smuggling operation, and I think we have the evidence against Stéphane now! Tell me, how do you know all this?"

"An educated guess that you have now confirmed," Jupiter said. "There was a folder in your car with the official Vietnamese national emblem! You sneaked into Mrs Willard's house and planted the bogus investigators on her—not just to get your hands on the wood, though, but to solve your case. Mr Mertens somehow knew this and got hold of the investigators so that they would hand over the wood when they found it."

"Luke was the one who took the basket from the summer cottage!" Jupiter continued.

All eyes fell on Bogus Jupiter, who stood there with a grim expression.

"So it was you, Luke!" Minh snapped.

"That's enough!" said the Belgian sharply. "Whatever part you play, fatso, you have taken away the basket of agarwood! And I want that now!" Suddenly he had a gun in his hand.

"You won't get far with it," Jupiter said calmly.

"Let that be my problem! The police can look for me for a long time!" Mertens barked. "Now, give the basket to me!" He was now aiming his gun directly at the First Investigator.

Jupiter exhaled and started moving ponderously. He had no choice but to walk slowly to the bench where he had hidden the basket. The others followed him, directed by Stéphane, who was at the end of the line—gun in hand.

Just before his destination, Jupiter hesitated. Now he urgently had to think of something. Should he throw the precious wood into the pond with one swing? But what kind of reaction would that provoke in Great Crested Grebe?

"Go on!" the Belgian urged.

Jupiter bent down next to the bush, but in mid-motion he froze.

"The basket is... gone!" stammered the First Investigator.

"Nice try!" the Belgian shouted and pushed forward—but there was really nothing under the bush. All he could see was the imprint of the basket in the grass.

The man turned to Jupiter. "Another trick, isn't it? This will cost you dearly!"

Sweating, Jupiter searched for an answer.

"No. No trick," said a voice from the darkness.

Everyone turned around.

Minh took advantage of the moment and knocked the gun out of Stéphane's hand with a well-aimed kick. It landed in the pond with a splash.

"Mrs Willard!" shouted Pete.

A few metres up the path, Alice Willard was in her wheelchair. No one had noticed her. By her side was the basket with the wood. "Really nice show you all are giving me here! I am not totally crippled, you know..."

The Three Investigators looked at each other and grinned.

"So that's what it was all about," she said, grabbing one of the pieces of agarwood from the basket and smelling it. "What happens to this now?"

"It belongs to the Vietnamese government," Li said. "I hope the Americans see it that way too."

“That might even be fair,” said Mrs Willard, “but you will understand, Li, that I cannot give it to you—especially when you deceived me!”

“The best thing is to leave the find to the police,” Jupiter said. “They will take the right measures... and also in relation to you, Mr Mertens...” Jupiter turned around, but the Belgian was no longer there!

Mrs Willard pulled out her mobile phone. “I’m calling the police!”

“Tell the officers to go to the Hotel Montana,” Luke said calmly. “That’s where he’s staying at the moment. I overheard him.”

“And why are you revealing this so suddenly?” asked Mrs Willard suspiciously.

“Because that crook set me up... and against my friends. I believe he never intended to pay us at all!”

Tired but satisfied, The Three Investigators returned to the summer cottage some time later. The police had been there and they all had to give their statements.

When Eric Nguyen died, Li continued her investigations but Alice Willard came into the picture. Li engaged the bogus investigators to create the riddle and planted the whole story on Alice. Then Li got the imposters hired to do the search—which was in fact, for the wood rather than silver or gold. Because of the riddle, Alice thought that it was silver and gold, and even paid the bogus investigators to get the metal detector.

Meanwhile, they also learned that the Belgian had indeed been caught when he went to get his luggage from the hotel room. Stéphane Mertens was anxious to get the last wood shipments so he made separate deals with Luke and Minh.

As for Mr Baxter, Mrs Willard would think about how to deal with him on another day—at least until after she had decided what she wanted to do with the house.

“I’m meeting Minh tomorrow,” Pete said. “You two can come with me if you want. Maybe Mark will have time too. We’ll search the whole beach with the metal detector!”

“—As long as Luke is not there,” Jupiter said.

“I don’t think he’s so hot with them right now. What about you, Bob?”

“Gladly!” Bob untied his ponytail. “What I’m most looking forward to is getting rid of this stupid disguise.”

Smiling, Pete pulled off his glasses. “It will take a little longer with Juve, though,” he said. “Maybe a wig will do for the time being.”

“You better bring in the stuff from out there!” Juve instructed. “We won’t want Mr Capote’s equipment to get damaged.”

“Wait a minute!” Pete said. “Aren’t we going to look for the platypuses?”

“You can go ahead,” Juve replied. “I’m tired and want to go straight to sleep.”

“Suit yourself,” Pete said and looked through the night-vision device, which was aimed squarely at the stream. “We didn’t even spend a second looking for the animals.”

For the next two minutes, Pete was silent and stared through the night-vision device. “That can’t be!” he suddenly exclaimed. “I think there’s actually something swimming there! Could be a platypus! Madness!”

“Ha, ha, ha,” Juve laughed sarcastically. “Not very convincing!”

“No, seriously, look for yourself!”

Jupiter waved it off, but Bob had become curious and took over the device. “Where?”

“There! In the moonlight! It’s just on its way to the opposite shore!”

“Indeed! I don’t know, but yes... it could actually be true. It’s swimming! Bummer... now it has disappeared behind the bushes!” Visibly excited, Bob sat down and continued

peering through the device.

Now Jupiter looked a little irritated.

“You look like a picklepuss, Jupe,” Pete said. “Not to worry! Since we are staying here for the night, we’ll have time to go look for the platypus!”